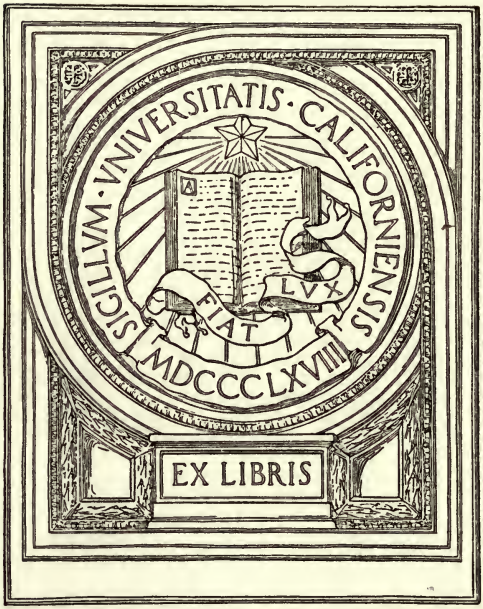
Wine o' the Winds

Keene Abbott


SIGILLVM · VNIVERSITATIS · CALIFORNIENSIS
LVX
FIAT
MDCCCLXVIII
EX LIBRIS

961
A132
W

Wine o' the Winds

"'I wonder,' he said, 'whether you would sell me that.'"

Wine o' the Winds

By

Keene Abbott

ILLUSTRATED

Garden City New York
Doubleday, Page & Company
1920

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

COPYRIGHT, 1920, BY
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED, INCLUDING THAT OF TRANSLATION
INTO FOREIGN LANGUAGES, INCLUDING THE SCANDINAVIAN

TO MY COMRADE

M13746

CONTENTS

PART I—WILD

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	A Daughter of the Plains	3
II.	The Girl and Her Father	15
III.	Youth	28
IV.	Drowned Affection	38

PART II—HOPES

I.	Settlement	45
II.	Holiday Time	52
III.	A Glad Surprise	61
IV.	Doubtful Joy	69

PART III—SHADOWS

I.	Called for Consultation	79
II.	"What Does He See in Her?"	85
III.	Summoned	93
IV.	If!	99
V.	The Monster	107
VI.	The Third Rider—Winifred?	110
VII.	Thanksgiving	114

PART IV—DEATH

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Wedding Guests	123
II.	Ministerial Delay	131
III.	Grim Gallantry	136
IV.	Lies!	142
V.	Farewell	150

PART V—SONG

I.	Night's Symphony	161
II.	Ghost Song	166
III.	The Plains	178
IV.	The Void	183
V.	Skulls	185
VI.	The Sweet-lipped Messenger	194

PART VI—NIGHT

I.	The Loves of Men	205
II.	Indian Country	211
III.	Smoke	221
IV.	Fire	225
V.	Benediction	234

PART VII—DAWN

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Joy	245
II.	Revolt	252
III.	Playful Ferocity	260
IV.	Beleaguered	269
V.	"Friend"	279
VI.	Achievement	287

PART VIII—SUNSET

I.	"Jumped Us"	293
II.	Hurt	304
III.	Fate's Cockpit	308
IV.	The Kiss	317
V.	The Cup of Kindness	327

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

"'I wonder,' he said, 'whether you would sell me that'" . . . . . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

"'A sweet woman,' she was murmuring. 'Beautiful and kind'" 126

"'You are not going to shirk, you contemptible braggart, you are going to do your full share'" 214

"'Not yet. It's mean of you to come so quick'" 310

PART I

WILD

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

CHAPTER I

A Daughter of the Plains

AS THE stage-coach moved along a smooth stretch of prairie trail, the easy sway and dip of the vehicle, in addition to a quiet and soothing patter of rain, had begun to exert a drowsy influence even upon the more restless of the two passengers. Now he did not so often raise a dripping curtain, nor peer out as if he would like to get away from his companion by plunging off yonder into that drenched solitude of falling night. But despite the tranquillizing mood of movement and weather, he still looked from time to time for anything which might show itself in the deepening darkness.

Once, when a sombre shape came briefly into view, he scarce identified it as a tent; for the gray shelter, sagging with the wet, seemed like some morose phantom lost there in the streaming wilderness. An inner light, feebly blurring through the canvas, disclosed vaguely a group of words daubed with axle-grease or tar.

POST-OFFICE
LETTERS TO THE STATES
50 C

After reading the sign on the tent, the restless traveller turned away, muffled himself comfortably

in his cloak, and was gradually being lulled to sleep, when the wonted undulations, the easy rocking of the conveyance, suddenly left off. The coach had stopped. In the darkness the talk of the two men mingled with the drip and splash and drumming.

Wide, wet whispers of the rain kept bringing one a sense of scope, immensity, of vast and impenetrable distances.

"She wouldn't stand by us," growled a husky voice. "Not for very long. I *knowed* she wouldn't."

Another man said: "Strained too much, going into the ditch."

The gruffer tones asserted:

"Snapped on us. That's what she's done. I heard her snap."

An investigation of some sort must be in progress; for yellow flecks of light—possibly one of the coach-lamps—kept moving about in the rain. The sleeping passenger awoke, yawned, shifted his position, and settled himself for more slumber. For to be here, warmly wrapped and safely sheltered, was such a snug consideration!

But suddenly a leather curtain lifted, and a powerful yellow eye came glaring in. It was the conductor with the coach-lamp. "Too bad," he was saying, "to roust you little birdies out of your nest. Too bad. A shame. Outrage! What do you say, Ash? Ain't it an outrage?"

Grunts came out of the darkness, and fragments of speech. "Clean busted. Knowed she wouldn't stand by us. Told the blacksmith she wouldn't. But he . . . a saphead! A Dutchman, that's

what he is, or Swede, or some other kind of foreigner!"

"Hear the rumpus he's making!" the conductor exclaimed, and winked, adding in a confidential tone: "He knows, Hugh does, that they'll be sending us some kind of mud wagon to take the place of this. For we're stalled; we're stuck here. An axle has busted on us. Off hind wheel. Going into the ditch, back yonder, that's what mussed us up."

The "back yonder" he mentioned was in reality a span of more than a hundred miles. A small distance, of course, in this big country. Moreover, the incident referred to casually as a trifle had almost resulted in a calamitous wreck. It came about through the establishment of a new piece of stage route by means of which a Kansas town, on the old military road, had been left with very infrequent mail service, and holding the stage company responsible for the reprehensible change, the citizens of the town had dug a pit-fall in retaliation. Now, so it developed, the sprung axle had come to grief; and the coach was to be abandoned here until repairs could be made, or until a "mud wagon," as the conductor called it, could be sent to pick up the mail pouches.

"Most likely," he added, "we won't pull out of this till sun-up or after. But up the trail a ways, a mile or so, is Gilbert's Ranch. If you want to, you might hang out there for the night."

Less heavily the rain seemed to bespatter the leather curtain which the uneasy traveller held up while he gazed into the wet void of the prairie night. A feeble yellow gleam shivered in the distance, while out of the black reaches of darkness came the lowing

of disquieted cattle, a great mass of them sending forth their deep and long-drawn protests against glum rumblings of ponderous thunder.

"Listen to that," said the one peering out. A new note of spirited interest had come into his voice, to betoken that something pleasanter was to be heard than either the bovine mooing or the remote barkings of little prairie wolves. "That," he went on, "must be the singing of herdsmen to hush the apprehensive cattle." Dark spaces of the prairie had indeed grown vocal, as if the wet gravity of the plains had begun a solemn sort of hymning. There were two voices lifted in an indefinable chant, a drift of slumberous song from out the night's immensity. The deeper utterance, fuller and more resonant than the other, seemed to be assuring the cattle that they need not be afraid; that skies would clear and courage come to them with the good winds blowing.

"Wine o' the wind, wine o' the wind,
Wine o' the big winds blowing!"

The strangely restless individual repeated aloud that recurrent verse of the drovers' song; and now he spoke with none of the aching lassitude formerly his.

"The shower seems to be breaking up. What do you say: shall we try a night's lodging at the ranch?"

Even though the sleepy state of his companion might yield little spirit for venturing into the night, the other considered the proposal not a bad idea; so the storm having abated to a fine and dying drizzle, the two men set forth, side by side, treading the

cushiony buffalo grass, and going on steadily in the direction of the guiding candle-beams.

In their faces both travellers must have felt the chill of a powdering moisture, yet it could well be that one of them shivered not so much with the dampening cold as with a spiritual dampening.

Said the man who shivered:

"It's farther to the ranch than it seemed."

"Yes," the other absently replied, "farther quite a bit."

It seemed to both, as they advanced toward the light shining from afar, that the roadside public house, one of those ranches scattered at remote intervals all along the Overland Trail, might now be holding festival; for through the darkness shrilled the pronounced rhythm of a dance tune played by fiddle and clarinet.

The travellers were right in supposing the place to be another of those establishments which deal in hay and grain and draught animals, and thrive upon what had come to be known as "the pilgrim trade."

As a means of relieving the monotony of a long wagon journey wayfarers of the plains liked to attend ranch-house dances; settlers, it appeared, were likewise drawn thither from long distances: thirty, forty, or sixty miles. To-night, at this particular ranch, the dance-room floor continuously throbbed, the bar kept busy, and several groups of card-players amused themselves.

One man, a grizzled and stubby individual in jacket and breeches of buckskin, amused the newcomers by trying to get up an argument with them about the best kind of bait to use in trapping beaver. He also

wanted to discuss the city of St. Louis. He had been there, he knew all about it—a heartless place! Lots of people; all the canyons *full* of people; every minute, all day long, people going by. And nobody asking you to wet up!

He carried this complaint to a girl in an orange-coloured shawl. The stage passengers watched him telling her solemnly about the meanness of St. Louis. And she smiled a little, but gave most of her attention to a game of euchre. One of the wall-light clusters, three candles on a bracket, with a tin-plate reflector behind the flames, vividly brightened her long-fringed Spanish shawl, while her white fingers busied themselves languidly with a bit of thin corn-husk filled with tobacco. When the rolling of her cigarette had been finished, she asked with an indolent drawl:

"Why don't somebody slip the lady a match?"

The card-players looked up. "Well, now," the dealer exclaimed, and stopped shuffling the deck in his heavy, rope-calloused hands, "if it ain't the kid, her own self!"

Another said:

"It don't look reasonable, Winnie; it sure don't: a trail drifter like you getting up such a come-on kind of a look! As smart, by George, as any señorita that ever flirted a fan."

Jocular compliments of these card-players were tinctured with something comradely, a sort of indulgent, big-brother tone. And despite the whiteness of the girl's well-shaped hands, the smooth ruddiness of her face indicated that she must have been exposed to the same weathering, the same fierce sun-

shine and sultry winds that had given such a leathery, nut-brown colour to the men.

"Hang around," a stocky individual observed, while sorting his cards. "Just you wait, now, till I play this hand out, and I'll swing you a whirl."

It was an invitation to dance; for the scrape of fiddles and the wheeze of a clarinet had again started up. One felt the booted jar of feet; candle flames quivered, and intermittently the accented beat of the tune was cut into by a nasal chant calling the changes of a quadrille.

"Do what?" the girl inquired, as her rounded chin with its warm hue of copper bronze went tilting up. "Wait, Stump Lancaster? For you? Yes, I will! Be patient about it as a coon at a coyote camp-meeting."

He was given to understand, this Stump Lancaster, that when she hobbled herself, and hung around waiting for somebody, it would not be for a scrub horse-wrangler who knows a heap sight more, maybe, about nursing lambs than he does about tending saddle-stock.

The card-players laughed, their game proceeded, money clinked on the table, and the girl in the orange shawl went loitering away. Hers was the bored indolence of one who might be sorry she had come here for recreation.

It could not have been anything new to her, this sort of place; for she seemed quite indifferent to what was going on, and scarcely gave a glance toward the bar, a plank across two barrels, where much drinking had been in progress.

As yet there had been little disorder. Members of

the two teamster castes, "mule-skinners" and "bull-whackers" had once, it is true, started a row, but had so far accommodated the ranch-keeper as to take their quarrel outside for violent settlement.

The red-faced proprietor declared emphatically that he wasn't going to have any rumpus here. He had even worked himself into such excitement over it that he did not know what was meant when the girl with the orange shawl asked him languidly for a match.

"Allow me," said a youthful by-stander in a travelling cloak, the restless man from the stage-coach, as he proffered a light which she used and negligently dropped.

Replacing his hat upon his head, after she went idling away, without a word of thanks, the young man imagined that she had scarcely noticed him. And that was well; for the desire was his to do all the noticing himself. Not that the most striking elements of the girl's appearance had attracted him, neither the high, silver-mounted comb holding in place the thick-clustering mass of her black-blue hair, nor yet the singularity of contrast made by the sun-embrowned ruddiness of her cheeks with the sinuous grace of the white fingers holding the cigarette. No, it must be something else which especially drew his interest.

When she had joined a group of spectators in front of a poker dealer, it seemed that here the players were all strangers to her, for she spoke to no one and appeared quite oblivious of their too-candid attention. That the boldness of those appraising eyes affected the young man very unpleasantly could be

seen by the way he scowled and withdrew, going off with back-stiffening disapproval.

At the open door, now framing an oblong slice of storm-blackness, he stood motionless, gazing at the prairie. Rain no longer fell; but sometimes, while he remained thus, the land flickered green with an amazing flatness; for vast spaces of the plains, even to the horizon, were lit palely or vividly by recurrent lightning flashes.

Breathing the thundery air and peering into the dark void, he did not move nor notice the blue eddies of tobacco smoke drifting past him in the draught. But by and by he gave a start of active surprise when he heard the girl with the orange shawl languidly asking:

"Maybe you've another match that's not working."

Quite unaware that she might have come to see him do what he had done before, he once more removed his hat and waited until the sulphur fumes of the light should die away. Only then, with the match burning into a clear flame between his cupped hands, did he permit it to tip the girl's cigarette with a fresh glow.

"I wonder," he said, intently looking at her, "whether you would sell me that?"

"Sell? You mean this?" Wonderingly she held up the cigarette, blew the ash from its red spark, and observed with a puzzled look: "What a notion!" Later she listlessly drawled: "Yellow money might buy it, if you have no diamonds on you. I don't know what price I ought to ask, not being used to the cigarette trade; but I reckon a quart or two of nice,

first-class diamonds, and a few gold mines, and some other junk of that kind, would be about right for one of my cigarettes."

She paused, doubtless expecting from him some sort of responsive chaff, but he only went on looking at her with meditative aloofness.

Rather timorously, meanwhile, he had put out his hand. "Please," he insisted.

"You really want it? Well, what for? To smoke?"

She saw from his expression it was not for that. What, then, if he should want it for a keepsake, a token, a something to remind him of lips richly red and lush with the sap of youth. Only to see whether he had in mind some absurd idea such as this, the girl surrendered the cigarette.

And was not well pleased. No, not at all pleased. For he held it absently and negligently, ready at any moment to drop the thing.

How different his conduct from that of another young man, a Texas ranger she had known! Months ago, at a dance, it was he who had found something of hers—something which, in truth, she may have intended him to find. He had picked up a broken garter, one prettily beribboned with lilac-coloured silk. Afterward he had gloated over his find, he had bragged about it, he had even made an indelicate exhibit of it among men.

Frankly and naïvely the girl told this stranger all about the incident. Then she added: "He had to give it back. Had to, or get hurt." The same lazy drawl was in her voice, but the indolence had gone out of her narrowed eyes. Now they stood darkly

wide, angry, and magnificent. "He gave it back," she said.

"Really!" was the only comment of her rather inattentive listener. Meanwhile he went on regarding her with his odd remoteness of expression, a most singular look as of strained fatigue, or heart-weariness, or youth gone stale.

The girl, however, continued talking. For what about the cigarette she had given him? Why had he offered to buy it? What did he mean to do with it? Presently she began to speak of different modes of smoking. The Indians, she said, mix crushed sumach leaves with their tobacco, or the inner bark of the red willow.

"Once," she went on, "I messed up Pappy's pipe-tobacco with dry sweet grass. And what he said to me, when he found it out, was something decorative. Such fuss and fuming! My stars!"

"Yes?" the young man questioned, with abstraction still sounding in his voice. And although she might be distinctly annoyed by his unapproachable remoteness, the girl would have been far less clever than she was if she had missed a certain doting wistfulness in his eyes. His attention, all this while, had apparently been held by the clear-cut and delicate curves of her mouth—a mouth rich in colour and vivid as a Christmas berry among holly leaves.

Only they were by no means placid lips. They pouted, they expressed almost as much dissatisfaction with him as when she abruptly exclaimed:

"Shucks! You hardly listen. I talk and talk, and you say 'Yes' or 'Really.' Short answers—that's the best I get!"

This, to be sure, brought the young man to earth. She quite astonished him. A sudden twinge passed over his face, to be followed instantly by an imploring earnestness:

"No offence was intended." He humbly bowed in his apology. "Certainly not. You must see I would be sorry to offend you."

With brusqueness he turned away, quite unheedful that she was saying:

"Don't go. Wait. It's mean, so it is; it's mean to catch a body up like that."

But he was gone. He strode hastily forth into the night. Once, to be sure, she saw his hurrying figure revealed by the lightning's bluish glare, but straightway he vanished, being effaced utterly by the black nothingness of prairie darkness. Her cigarette, meanwhile, lay upon the floor, flattened, trod upon, carelessly crushed by the heel of his boot.

CHAPTER II

The Girl and Her Father

THE girl continued gazing out into the moist night while the young man steadily withdrew, now appearing and now disappearing. She watched him approach a long mound resembling part of a fort's earthworks; but since the era of barbed wire had not yet come to the West the extended barrier could be only the sod-built fence of a stock-corral. It seemed for a time as if the erratic wanderer must go blundering against the low wall, but when a flickering serpent tongue of flame next jaggedly cracked the night, she could see that he had stopped short.

Who could he be, that attractive young man? And why this eccentricity of behaviour? The girl at once began to look about for his companion, the taller man, whose hat and travelling cloak had glistened with moisture when he came in, exactly as the hat and cloak of his associate had been misted over. Noting where he stood, she went over to him with the confiding directness of a child, an unabashed and rather saucy child, whom everybody likes.

"You know him," she said. "You came in with him. I mean the one I was talking with just now."

He returned her smile, being pleased with her good looks and especially with her fine teeth which seemed

all the whiter in contrast with the ruddy warmth of her tanned face.

"Know him? A little. As well as one may be expected to know his own brother."

"What, brothers? And your name?"

"North. I am Victor North."

"Bound for Cherry Creek?"

"No, for California."

"But why not try your luck in the Pike's Peak country? There's gold, they say, in Cherry Creek—heaps and heaps. Our outfit," she added, "is heading for the new town; Denver, they call it. We're all the way from Palo Pinto County. Started with the grass, and been drifting our stock, grazing them all the way. One of the first herds, Pappy says, ever to come up into this country; and we've made it, he says, in good shape. Some storm-loss and stampedes, but no Indian trouble worth mentioning. Satisfied the Comanches with some critters, and later the Kiowas had to have a few. But it was all right. They only took the poor stuff, the lame stragglers."

Victor supposed it must be a big drive. "I judged so," he observed, "by the enormous lowing we heard back yonder two or three miles, where the stage had a breakdown."

"A thousand head in that bunch," she told him, "and another outfit following. In a few weeks, now, Pappy hopes to have them ranging on Cherry Creek."

All this had been told, apparently, by way of drawing information from North about himself and his brother; but since he had revealed no inclination to

"loosen up," as Westerners call it, the girl presently said:

"Maybe you're in business together, you two?"

"No," he answered, "my brother happens to be a professional man, a doctor, while I——"

"A doctor? So? Well, he has kind eyes. And," she hastily added, in order that this young man might not feel left out, "you have, too!"

Her ingenuousness made him smile, and he smiled still more when she added:

"You know how to act. Not a bit stand-offish; but he——" Her red lips pursed themselves into a spoiled-child kind of pouting. "I want to be friends with him," she candidly announced. "I can't stand it, hardly, if everybody isn't friends with me. So, when he comes back, just you tell him I'm sorry for making him cross, and I want to make it right. You can tell him that. Tell him I'll dance with him. *Will* you tell him? Please do. For see," she went on, slowly turning herself about, "I've dressed up for to-night." Fan-wise, with a pretty grace, she spread her expansive, rose-coloured skirt, and curtseyed to him as in the minuet. "Do you like it?" she asked. "Is it pretty? My trunk's in the chuck-wagon. The boys smuggled it in. Takes up too much room; a bother and a nuisance, but they don't care. They like me."

"Very pretty," Victor murmured.

Her snowy wrists had come out from under the shawl's silk fringe. "My hands are not so bad. I try to keep them nice. Wear gloves, you know. I *like* nice hands. Don't you?"

He did like them; especially hers, he said. "Yes,

they'll do," she conceded. And while he went on gazing at her with amused good nature, he suddenly caused her to look up in wonder.

"Oh!" he had exclaimed, and she asked at once:

"What's *that* for?"

"Astonishing! It's the resemblance. I never saw such a striking likeness. You are really enough like someone we know to be of the same family."

"Am I?"

"Really you are."

"It's the mouth," said the girl.

"'Pon my word, I do believe it is."

"Yes," she affirmed, "it's that. *He* kept looking at my mouth. And didn't want to see me smoking. For she, I reckon, doesn't smoke. Does she?"

"She?"

"I'm eighteen. Is she older? Does she dance well? Has she a pretty foot?"

One of her own, in a rosy-hued stocking, neatly slippered, showed itself from under a lifted flounce. Truly a pretty foot, with orange ribbons crossed on the arch and enspanning the fluent curves of the well-modelled ankle.

"There!" she exclaimed. "And what about eyes? Mother always used to say that *my* eyes were nicer than my mouth, but—— Has *she* fine eyes? What colour? Is she much educated?"

This naïve eagerness and the elemental quality of it might have been far more entertaining to the young man if it had not made him so uncomfortable. Her thoughts were not less transparent than the openness of the prairies to which she belonged. And all her

engaging candour made one think of untamed and untamable witcheries of nature which beguile us with serenity, only to betray us with violence.

So uneasy the girl had made North feel with the assault of her child-like questionings that he asked abruptly, by way of evasion:

"How have you hurt yourself?"

"Oh, that!" she said, and instantly raised the bright-hued shawl to scarf up a long, horizontal abrasion of her sun-browned throat. "The boys—deuce take 'em!—will always be swinging a loop over me, if I don't watch out. Shag Mills pretty near roped me off my horse."

"He—what? Lassoed you, and almost dragged you from the saddle! What a ruffian!"

Observing the twinge of revulsion in his face, the girl threw back her head and laughed.

"Why, no harm meant!" she exclaimed. "It's a game we have. Rough, though. I don't like it when they get *too* rough."

"Tender treatment!" he ironically observed. "And if you were to get badly hurt?"

"I *am* hurt," she declared. "For I just tell you what: it's a heap sorrier to have folks act unfriendly than it is to get your neck rope-burnt. But when he comes back, I'm going to dance with him, your brother."

"Not with him, I'm afraid." Victor smiled at her assurance.

"*Why* won't I?" There was challenge in her eyes.

"Because—well, it's because he happens to be feeling rather too old to dance."

"Don't say that!" she protested. "Don't tell

lies. Old? Why, he has no gray hairs at his temples, the same as you."

"No, to be sure. But what, now, if he should feel much older than I?"

The girl stood still. She stood looking intently into his eyes, and then he heard an impatient tapping of her slippered foot, while she took a deep breath, obdurately insisting:

"He *shall* dance with me."

She started away, lightly, her feet in time to the blatant rhythm of a tune which caused even the candle flames to throb as if they might be saluting each other in the Virginia reel. While withdrawing she gave him a smile over her shoulder, and once paused, turned half about, and dropped him a curtsey.

After the girl in the orange shawl had passed through changing groups of people to the back part of the room, he continued looking in the direction she had gone. Nor did he withdraw his gaze until he heard a deep voice at his elbow inquiring if he were Doctor North. It was a gun-belted stranger, past middle-age, sturdy and erect, with squinted eyes, the eyes of the plainsman long accustomed to shield themselves from dust and wind and the wounding glare of the sun.

"No," the young man replied, "I'm not the doctor; I'm his brother."

North felt much attracted by the drawling cordiality of the stranger's resonant voice. Not by that alone, but by something—he knew not what—something droll, vexed, and helpless in the stern expression on the swarthy face. On either side of the mouth

the heavy roll of moustache extended itself into a brushy whisker growth, with a frayed tuft to right and left of the resolute chin.

"No place for a girl," he blurted out. "Hell, no! If her dear mother were living—— But what's to be done when a man has a daughter like that? Keep her in a convent school? Send her East to her aunt? Phew!"

His massive shoulders moved, but whether in a shrug of dissatisfaction or of resignation could not be determined. He went on, with a jerk of his thumb toward a corner table, at the rear of the room:

"Look at her: playing my poker hand. Winning, too, I'll bet a hat!"

Parental pride struggled with exasperation. "I just tell you what it is," he added. "I'm no kind of a father. She gets around me. By thunder, she does *that* to me!" The pantomime of twisting something about his finger indicated what he meant, and then his brown hands gave a toss of comic surrender. "I even told her (here his elbow gave North a nudge to emphasize the point), told her I wouldn't come over here to you, and give myself a soldier's introduction. But, all the same, here I am." Offering a long, black cigar, he said: "Have one of these centre-fires. I reckon it will smoke. I worked through one of them, but didn't have to strain hard to control my enthusiasm. Seems to be some kind of cousin to the forty-rod whiskey they're dishing up in tin cups over yonder. Near as I can figure it, they've mixed in a peck of red pepper to give some jump and spirit to the rain-water that's leaked into the barrel. Seems as if a gallon or so of corn juice

ought to last a long while, the way it gets doctored and trimmed up and decorated."

"The advantage one has," North replied, "in being not much of a drinker is the immunity he enjoys against such dreadful concoctions."

"Take it all around," the plainsman went on, "I can stand Taos, or white mule, or the very worst the Indian traders have. Liquor can't stump me, nor handling a cow outfit. Have fetched up, first and last, out of some tolerable tight places. Between Cache Creek and the Witchita hills, for instance, it looked as if a buffalo stampede might carry off all my stock. We split the buffalo herd by shooting into it. Knew what was up by the great dust moving toward us. So we rode ahead, broke the stampede, and saved a bobble. The boys held our cattle. Yes; could manage that all right. But—this daughter of mine! *Por Dios!*"

He chuckled. He seemed to think it altogether absurd that his own flesh and blood should be so altogether unmanageable.

"Here," North announced, "is my brother now, if you would like to speak with him."

The man referred to had just come in out of the darkness; and blinking in the light, he kept glancing about as if in search of someone, and when presented to Hugh Barton, father of the oddly attractive girl, young Doctor North seemed scarcely to comprehend the introduction.

"Noisy place, this," the cattleman observed. "Suppose we get away from here—outside, perhaps, where my chin-music may have some chance."

The three men moved out, accordingly, into the

night, arriving by and by at the low sod wall of the corral. Here they chatted together, sometimes resting their arms on the fence, despite its growth of wet grass and weeds. Meanwhile the saddle stock of the enclosure came straying nearer and nearer, as horses will, through the impulse of curiosity.

"The white-faced one," the drover observed, although nothing more than a gray streak showed among the dark mass of animals, "he's Winnie's favourite. Wicked, too. Plenty of devil in him." As he spoke the man knocked his feet together in a manner causing his Mexican spurs to give forth a peevish jingle. He was muttering, or maybe growling would be the better word, that one of these days the girl would surely get her back broken, or her neck. He even called it her *fool* neck.

Then he said:

"My own fault, though—partly. I set the lads on to hector and raise Ned with her, and get her soured on this kind of life. Didn't want her trailing cattle with me. No place for a girl. Hell, no! Is it?"

The Norths thought it was not; they could conceive, they said, of something far more desirable for a young lady than the hardships of the plains.

"Once," the girl's father went on, "I had to come down hard. Discipline, you understand. Pretty rough on a man, I want to tell you, to be tying up his daughter to a wagon-wheel. I did that. Didn't care the blue end of a finger-nail what the others thought of it. I did that. She stayed there, too—half the night."

He was obviously one of those Texans whose speech had acquired the colloquial phrases and the

decorative profanity current among the vaqueros of Mexico.

"Didn't set very well with the outfit," he went on. "*Cuerpo de Dios!* I should say not! Men got ugly about it; I even looked for something nasty. For the boys—somehow—all mellow about her, every lad of them."

Suddenly his voice broke into merriment. Robustly he laughed, robustly, with the doting joy of parenthood.

"Scolded them," he asserted, "that's what Winnie did! Yes, lit into them right smart. Made 'em understand how, having disobeyed her father, she deserved what she was getting. Did, too; she deserved that, or worse."

Doctor North ventured the opinion that it must have been some very serious form of disobedience to merit such punishment.

"Serious? It was," the father declared. "Began with the trouble we had in crossing the Cimarron. River was up, banked full, a powerful current, and the herd refusing to take the water. Worked them in, of course—a dozen times, maybe. And the devil to pay when we did! Critters got to milling, and jamming, and miring down. Such fuss and bellowing! Horns clacking like a thousand games of billiards; bulls roaring; cows and dogies and steers in a row of mooing. Mad, too, from being worked so much. The north bank happened to be fairly steep, and the leaders wouldn't try hard enough to make the riffle. They'd fall back, plunge, flounder, get on the prod, send the whole herd ramming and jamming down stream. Looked like a heavy loss. Finally a

Mexican risked himself, going in with his horse. And went under! His lifeless body caught on a snag two miles below. After such an accident you may know a man wouldn't want his daughter—— Hum! I get in a sweat with thinking about it—— Plunge, splash! Winnie on that white-faced pony going into the squeeze! I shouting myself hoarse! She paid no attention. Disobedience! Reckless, senseless, damnation disobedience! Swam her pony. Pushed through, somehow, and first we knew she was tailing up a steer. Yes. Got him started, and that did the business. The rest followed. No more dead carcasses drifting down stream. Our lads yelling like mad, 'She's done it! The kid, she's done it! She's set us across!' 'Yes,' thinks I, 'but she's going to get punished just the same. I won't have her doing that sort of thing!'"

While he talked the dark mass of horses in the corral had begun to wander away. And all at once the white-faced one uttered a savage squeal, biting at a neighbour and at the same moment letting fly with his hoofs at another animal. After the scamper and temporary commotion had subsided the cattleman went on:

"For three days I didn't speak to Winifred. Long days, men! Three of the deadest, longest days! She melted me, though. She'd be around with her coaxing ways, teasing, and kissing, and getting her arms around me, and sometimes laughing the same as her mother used to laugh. On the fourth day she put on her girl-clothes, knowing how sick I was of seeing her in boots and shirt and breeches. Did that and even quit her cigarettes for awhile, to make

things right with me. Yes, and I wish she'd stay shut of them, for good and all. I do. It's the looks of the thing. Her mother wouldn't like it. And you, Doctor North—— Winnie says *you* don't like it, either."

It surprised the young man to hear this; he did not know, he said, that his opinion on this point had been expressed.

Her father went on, speaking slowly and judiciously: "Well, it's not little flaws that count. It's the woman in her that counts. All it needs, maybe, is to be gentled and fined down. And look here, now: you two men, you North brothers, who carry with you the mark of blood and breeding—you, I shouldn't wonder, can help me if you will. Talk to her; that's what I want. Help me make her understand that what she ought to have is schooling, cultivation, advantages of every sort. Home influence, that's what she needs. And there's her mother's sister in Springfield would be glad to take her. Wants her. Would do anything in the world for her."

Victor threw away the cigar he had been smoking, and its rosy glow, curving through the night, splashed up little sparks when it hit the ground. "Strikes me," he observed, "that you're giving us rather a tall order. I, for my part, do not feel richly qualified to serve as wise counsellor."

"And there may be no inviting chance," Doctor North added, "to impress your daughter with our overpowering sagacity."

Ignoring the note of satire, the father observed: "Chance? Why, yes; chance enough. For instance,

the rope-burn on her neck ought to be getting well. Treat that, if you will; make her your patient."

Slowly the young physician replied, as if it might be costing him painful effort to get out the words:

"The practice of medicine—sorry!—but I've given it up."

"Practice be damned! A little grease and flour does the trick. In a case like this, surely you won't throw off on me. So, come now; what do you say?"

He had rested a hand on a shoulder of each brother, and stood waiting for the decision.

Victor did not speak. His conservative and rather suspicious nature could but withhold the ready response he would like to make.

The younger man, on the contrary, gave a prompt and favourable reply. He said to the girl's father: "Thanks for your confidence. And even if nothing comes of it, I'll try my luck at persuasion."

And he was thinking:

"What a queer situation! Piquant, though. It may even make me forget that all such insects as I ought to be brushed off the earth."

CHAPTER III

Youth

PROMPT to observe the friendly humour of the three men, after they had re-entered the ranch house, the girl with the orange shawl abandoned the poker table. Nimbly tripping, she came forward at once, her rose-coloured skirt, bell-shaped and distended, seeming fairly to flow along.

Greeting the brothers with a smile and a prim little curtsey, she did not await an invitation from Dr. Harry North to dance, but offered herself as a partner, and with so naïve a grace that he would have been churlish to decline the opportunity of escorting her forth into the large room where a throng of waltzers eddied and whirled. But the dance proved not much of a success. On his part it lacked flexibility, being altogether too formal, too unyieldingly correct. He seemed, indeed, almost to forget the presence of that young girl, lithe and untrammelled, rhythmically swaying in his arms.

It may have been the desire to withdraw from dizzy evolutions, and stuffiness, and uncongenial festivity, which made him prompt in letting her know that her father had asked him to dress the abrasion on her neck. A good idea, she assented, cordially adding that there were horses in the corral. She would go "cinch on the hulls"; they would each "crawl into

the saddle, and lam away down yonder to the cow-camp."

On the way thither, riding through the clearing prairie night, with the moon still wading in clouds but sometimes fitfully revealing her companion, "Hark!" she presently enjoined, with a tone of pleased interest. "That, away over yonder on the river flats, is the singing of the boys on night-herd."

With a low-toned, contralto utterance, she herself hummed the tune, keeping with the rhythm of the melodists remotely heard; and afterward, having caught the lilt of the lyric, she even sang the words which North took to be the happy adaptation of some old Spanish ballad:

"When the stars wink out, and the day comes new,
And the grass runs green to the sky-rim's blue,
In the cup o' the dawn I drink to you
With the rise o' the good wind's blowing.

Wine o' the wind, wine o' the wind,
Wine o' the big winds blowing!"

Coming to the last line of the refrain, she drolly imitated the deep register of a man's bass voice singing out of the distance.

"That one—hear it?" she asked. "That will be old Rollins. 'Whiskers' the boys call him. Awfully proud of his beard and his voice. Sings a lot; but, generally speaking, he's most awful quiet—and nasty in a gun fight. The outfit didn't take any notice of him the night he cried. The boys *didn't dare* notice him." She laughed a little. "Queer to see him like that; funny, too: drops running down and catching

in his gray whiskers. Ridiculous! Just stood and cried. I made him cry."

"You? How in the world?"

"By getting punished. Pappy had to tie me up to the wagon-wheel. And he, old Rollins, wanted to turn me loose. Wouldn't do, of course; I wouldn't have that. So, old Rollins cried. You see, I darn his socks for him; once I patched his shirt for him, and he could hardly stand it to see me tied up."

While opportunity offered, North did not fail to mention that what her father greatly coveted for her was schooling, social advantages, and all that. Only she did not want to go to her Aunt Bess. She would rather go to her Uncle Jeff's. But if she did go there she would have to put up with her cousins. "Nasty cousins," she called them. They were the sort, it appeared, to refer to one as a Johnny rebel, and to say that her drawling Texas vernacular sounded "niggery."

While she went on describing her Eastern relatives, another flock of cloud vapours went herding across the moon. North waited, with some interest, for the nebulous radiance to shine clear again, for under that neutralizing influence, her cheeks lost their tanned and weathered look and were even given a pale lustre—an effect emphasized by the contrast of grape-purple hair shadowing the well-featured countenance. Seen thus, the beauty of profile, though lacking refinement, had much the same sort of charm as that face which so insistently haunted his memory.

"Too bad I'm the kind to fuss my Aunt Elizabeth," the girl was saying. "For she's such an old

dear, and I do fret her so! Well, and ought I to go back to her?—that's what bothers me."

Did she imagine that his rapt look and doting admiration were the homage paid her undeniable attractiveness? Whatever the girl may have thought, it is certain that she awarded him eager attention when he gave it as his opinion that Hugh Barton would regard himself as a poor sort of father if he were to miss giving his daughter the kind of opportunities which he felt she ought to have.

For all that, the young man could not say, positively, that he subscribed to the parental idea. The point of chief importance was whether she would be made dull and unhappy by living in the East.

"Oh, dullness, dullness!" young Doctor North exclaimed with protesting earnestness. "It's dullness plays the devil with human souls. Your dull man, he who goes stale with hard work, with the weariness of business or professional cares, may be as bad for the world as a man intentionally wicked. Do you know what kind of men make the most willing volunteers in the armies, both North and South? It is they who are sick of cursed, nagging, carking responsibilities. They fight. We call it patriotism. But isn't it boredom? I've known of sedate, respectable, church-going men to fly off the handle. Sprees, vice, a dirty mess. No matter that one may abominate, with his whole nature, the things he does. All the same, he does them. And do you know why? It's his release from dullness."

He stopped short, breathing fast; then added with a disgruntled smile:

"Faugh, what gabble! All this, and yet I haven't

said what I mean. I only mean, Miss Barton, that if this wild life of the plains is pleasant to you, then why change it for something tame, conventional, commonplace, and dull?"

The girl suddenly laughed. She laughed, checked her mirth, said "Excuse me," and even put a hand over her mouth; but instantly laughed again with hilarious abandon. Nor could Harry North understand what it was all about until she fell to taunting him.

"Pappy wants to send me to my aunt. You were to back him up. He must have had a promise out of you. And what a way you have of keeping your promise!"

"Maybe there's a higher truth," he answered, "than the mere keeping of a promise."

At once he felt a hand resting upon his arm, and he heard the girl saying, with something in her voice half shy and wholly wistful:

"You don't get preachy, and go on about what's my duty, and thus and so, and be tiresome. I didn't mean to go away, but I'm going. Now I am. I want to learn to talk, and have nice ways—be genteel, as my mother used to say."

He did not answer, but he was as one who no longer sees what is before him, even though it be something as fresh as a girl's alluring face and a mouth wondrously red. Poor maid, poor hoyden of the plains, she had been forgotten, suddenly and utterly.

Nor did Winnie lack the intuition to suspect the cause of this forgetting. In jealous resentment of it, once he had finished with dressing the rope-burn, among her friends at the cow-camp, she pettishly

refused to ride back with him to the frontier festivities at the ranch. If he wanted to go on thinking about that other girl, all right; let him!

North, however, was not in a humour to be piqued by this snub. The open country, the herdsmen singing, the drover's daughter and her father—they were all factors in an unaccountable joyousness which had come to him. He smiled, he breathed deep of the moist breeze whispering across the plains through the wet grass; and he spoke absently to the girl as if she existed for him not as an individual, nor scarcely as a case to be professionally considered.

"Good-night," he said, while the cook's lantern at the wagon of the cattle-camp still yellowed his face. And he added with the air of one eager to be off: "Must be going now."

Going where? He could not have told. He had started away, all heedless of the girl's rather huffy offer of a saddle horse. "Better ride back to the ranch," she said. "A long way to walk."

North stopped short, and came back, and raised his hat in a manner less formal than boyish.

"Not nice of me," he was saying, "positively rude to be leaving in such a fashion! No word of thanks for the good ride and the good talk with you. It's been, altogether, something jolly. It's stirred me up to do what I should have done this long while ago. A letter, that's what it is; I must be writing a letter. No horse, thank you; for it's not far from here to the stage-coach, and my portmanteau is there. I'll go there and write my letter. Good-night."

Once more he left her, forgot her, walking away with a swing and a light-footed buoyancy.

He did not look back. On he went, hardly knowing whether in the right direction or not. Nor cared! For hope had come to him, gay and unreasoning; a giddy youthfulness of hope had completely lifted him out of the black smother of his self-contempt. He was humming the refrain of the cowmen's song, "Wine o' the big winds blowing," and as he strode along he kept thinking what folly it had been to regard himself as a venomous insect! All nonsense. He might, damn it all, be good for something yet.

As for contentment, peace of mind, happiness—no, of course! Miracles aren't possible. There can be no making whole a shattered romance. All the same, he would write to Alice Arden. He had promised, and he would do it. Why not? What harm to let her know that she was keeping alive in him the desire to be good for something.

Yes, write; that was the thing—write, write! He knew the place, but how find words for writing?—wonderful words to make her see that hope still lived in him, that youth had lightened him, that love—for a little while—had cloven away the iron shackles of remorse.

He felt in his pocket for a stub of dull-pointed pencil, and smiled as he looked at it, with a foreknowledge that the message, also, would probably be a dull thing.

Well, what if it should be? No matter about prosy words! Her eyes would light them up, her understanding would give them grace, her woman's faith in him would know how to warm them to eloquence.

Quick, then—his portmanteau, paper, a carriage-lamp! Toward the stage-coach, temporarily abandoned, he hastened at once; and with travelling bag across his knees, he wrote the hours away. He wrote eagerly, facilely, never hesitating for words. Youth sang in him. Love's torch so brightly burned that the light of dawn had gradually subdued the candle-flame to a dim and colourless fire, while he, still writing, remained all unconscious of the change, never yet suspecting that the garish day had come! Soon after the brightening dawn had dimmed the candlelight, the swiftly moving pencil finished its work; and still in his hopefulness of mood, Harry North signed himself "Youth" to the last of the closely written pages. For of the intimate and endearing names Alice Arden had for him, this one seemed best to express her protecting regard, a kind of mothering responsibility for him. She, in truth, was younger in years than he, and yet she liked to call him "Youth!"

The letter signed, the writer dared not read it over; for he knew he would not be pleased with the achievement. It would be too cold, it would lack elegance, it would say too much or not enough, be excessively high flown, or sadly and drearily simple. Better, then, to fold it, seal it, send it—post the scribbled nonsense now, at once, and have done with it!

Recalling the tent seen yesterday, in the rainy darkness, he instantly sped off down the trail. The place, he thought, could not be far distant, since the axle had snapped shortly after the coach had swung along past that gray shelter, with the POST OFFICE sign obscurely revealed by a light within. Now the

shrunken canvas, stretched taut with the wet, was steaming in the morning sun.

People had assembled there. A wagon train having stopped near at hand, its immigrant population had been drawn hither, attracted by a daubed inscription: "LETTERS TO THE STATES, 50C." And being instructed by the practice of the others, young Doctor North inserted a half dollar through a slot in a barrel-top and let the clerk have his letter.

But no sooner had it left his hand than the impulse strengthened in him to have it back, being now convinced that it could be nothing better than impudence for a scapegrace like himself to be paying his addresses to such a woman! He had set her free. She should be done with him. Never again would he have the effrontery to see her, or speak to her, or write to her.

"Mail!" shouted a rider who came galloping swiftly up. Mounted on a buckskin-coloured cayuse, it was a wiry young fellow with hat-brim and cartridge-belt adorned with Mexican coins. He seemed extremely impatient, he fumed irritably while letters were being checked off, tied into parcels, and thrust hastily into a leather pouch. Then, the bag being tossed to him, he struck spurs and quirt to his horse, going off in a burst of furious speed.

Well, so be it. Being done past recalling, why regret what was done? Once more Harry North walked lightly and breathed deeply, filling his lungs with the clean, moist, radiant freshness of the prairies.

Upborne by this happiness, intoxicated with visions no less bright than the lark-singing loveliness

of the sky and the wild-flower wonder of the green plains, he did not see the east-bound stage-coach rapidly advancing, until the silk-tipped lash of a long and sinuous whip had snapped briskly within some hundred yards of him. Then he looked up, surprised by bits of gay colour. A wine-hued parasol, vivid as a crimson poppy, bobbed in time to the sway and swing of the vehicle, beside the driver whose whip-handle, adorned with silver ferrules, kept flashing in the brilliant sun. Ribbons of a girl's bonnet, red ribbons tied under her chin, fluttered and gayly danced.

Suddenly North grew aware that the parasol was not merely nodding; he saw it excitedly bobbing a salute to him, and he heard Winnie Barton gayly calling out:

"Good-bye, Hal North! Good-bye!" Other words, mere fragments of phrases, came drifting back to him: "Write—— Promised—— Don't forget!"

He smiled. He waved his hand and his hat. All his innermost being gave thanks for that hoyden wild thing, the drover's daughter. She was like a draught of rude, rough wine.

"The wine o' the big winds blowing."

Good hopes had revived in him. Without her, where should he have found courage to write any word at all to the aunt and ungrudging guardian of three orphaned children, that glory of young womanhood, that fine, unselfish, mothering heart whom he knew as Alice Arden?

CHAPTER IV

Drowned Affection

NO LATER than the day following Harry North's night of ecstasized authorship in the stage-coach, a distressing truth in regard to his letter came unexpectedly to light while he and his brother were still west-bound passengers. They remained with the crippled conveyance, whose broken part, having been propped up by a sled-like skid, must be slowly dragged along toward the next "home" station for blacksmithing repairs to be made.

What the Norths regarded as extraordinary was the lack of inquisitiveness among half-a-dozen mounted men while passing the plodding coach. They asked not a single question regarding the accident which had damaged the stout vehicle. Two men on mules, and the rest on horses, carried rifles. One of the party, abruptly reining in his horse, began to make inquiries about something which must have been considered of vastly more importance than any mere mishap resulting in a broken axle.

"Hey, Cap! I say, Cap! Seen anything of a post-office? A post-office in a tent?"

The stage driver jocosely answered:

"Why? Lost one?"

Another of the armed men, a gaunt fellow with tobacco raising a lump in the side of his brown and

bristly cheek, gave a spurt of brown juice. He spat and mournfully declared:

"It's a chore, so it is; it's a chore to write letters. Costly, too. Four bits to send a letter."

The first man added:

"They got a tent. Sign on it, 'Fifty Cents to the States.' Maybe, now, you've seen such a tent. Have you?"

So eagerly insistent was the demand that Doctor North announced:

"I know the place. I posted a letter there."

"You did! When? Where 'bouts?"

"It would be five miles, perhaps, or more, straight on down the valley."

"Was there a board with a slit in it?"

Being assured that there had indeed been such a slot for receiving half dollars, the inquisitor hurriedly went on:

"Did the mail-rider come up in a shirt-tearing rush? His horse all wet? Hey, was his horse wet, or not?"

"Really, I can't say."

"What kind of a horse?"

"A cayuse. Buckskin coloured, I believe, and very swift."

The investigator looked round at his companions. "There, now!" he exclaimed.

Apparently they had all travelled far, for the jaded mounts with heaving sides dripped spume from the bits and sweat from the fetlocks.

No more was said; but with lean jaws grimly set the leader carefully wiped the forward sight of his rifle against the sleeve of his linsey-woolsey shirt.

Next moment he struck rowels to his horse. Other riders did the same, and away went the scattered cavalcade, briskly and ominously galloping.

Before the throb of hoofs had quite died out in the prairie distance the stage driver observed with mild interest: "'Pear to be going somewheres. And tolerable earnest about it!"

Later, during the period required for repairing the stage-coach, the wife of the man who kept the station treated the waiting passengers to her views regarding the probable mission of the armed men. "They stopped here," she said, "to water their stock, to ask questions. And the way they spoke up about that post-office—— I've heard of it before. It's a swindle. Must be. You can't make nothing else out of it. Weeks ago we heard tell of the fraud. And didn't believe it. Sounded made-up and unreasonable. Too much risk about it to be true. Of course, crooked Johnnies might come such a trick —once, or maybe twice; but to work such a swindle steady and regular might be just a *leetle* bit brash. First we heard of the post-office dodge was when it got started near Fort Laramie; and next, after that, it got to working at Cottonwood Springs."*

*The bogus post-office on the plains was at one time a feature of the life of the pioneers. It is described by the late John S. Collins, post trader at Fort Laramie from 1872-82, in his book of reminiscences, "Across the Plains in '61."

"Two 'Johnnies-Come-Lately' had set up a tent, cut a slit in a board large enough to pass a silver dollar, laid this across a barrel, into which they dropped a half dollar for each letter. While letters were being checked off a rider on a cayuse pony would ride up in great haste, and call for mail, saying, 'Can't wait. Behind time', etc. He had just come out of the river, wet to the back. When the bag of mail was handed out he was off, to ride further down the Platte. He would dump the mail into the river, turn his pony out, and wait for the arrival of the next train of pilgrims. Sergeant Snyder of Fort Laramie said: 'It was nothing but a damn swindle, but they made a bushel o' money out of it.'"

In the kitchen doorway of the stage station the woman had begun to wipe a dripping platter, a capacious dish upon which antelope steaks had recently been served. Her audience, the North brothers, remained seated, meanwhile, on a bench in the shade of the house wall.

"Swindle?" Victor repeated, inquiringly. "We don't, I'm afraid, quite get what you mean."

"Why, a false post-office—that's the point. Mail don't go to the States. Nothing like it. Post rider only goes flogging along down the river a piece; and safe out o' sight—a mile or two, mebbe—he rides into the water, dumps out the letters, and then lazies around till the next immigrant outfit comes along."

"A clever trick, right enough!" Victor North exclaimed.

"It is," the woman agreed. "It's smart. But unsafe! For them Missouri pilgrims, who knows, might get on the rampage and act rough. Hope they won't be *too* harsh. Might do good to slit open a rapscallion hide with ox-whips; that, I reckon, wouldn't be too on-Christian. But—you can't tell. Once a bunch o' men get their dander up over a raw deal, and you can't never tell how far they'll go. If it was important letters they wrote to the folks back home; if it was *real* important letters that got splashed into the river, you better believe *I* wouldn't want to be the postmaster of that tent outfit. You bet I wouldn't! Not me!"

Once the stage journey had been resumed, Harry North sat very still, moving only with the rocking motion of the coach as he went on gazing steadfastly at the floor. So, then, the letter he had

written, the letter of hope and honesty and profound affection, had got nowhere. He thought of it a-swirl in swift waters. He had a vision of sodden paper pulp, of something soaked and submerged, a tiny raft bravely riding the current for a time, to sink at last and vanish utterly, a thing done for, and useless as a melted snowflake.

Alice Arden did not, in truth, receive that letter; and there would be no other.

PART II

HOPES

CHAPTER I

Settlement

EAGER questionings filled the first letter from Alice Arden, which Victor North received in Atchison, Kansas, after he had gone West with his brother. What, she asked, were the people like? Were there schools in the new settlements? Had there been any recent cyclones?

She further mentioned intimate friends of her family, Captain Harris and his wife. The Harrises, she thought, would be likely to emigrate to the new country, possibly to Kansas or Nebraska Territory.

"Ever since the Mexican War," Alice wrote, "the Captain has been keen for pioneering. He believes he could do well as a town-site promoter."

Not much penetration was required to understand what she had in mind. If she remained in the old town, back East, she knew she would not see Harry North again. He would never return. But out yonder, in that far wilderness—who knows?

Were she one with only herself to consider, doubtless she would have the courage, and the audacity, too, of venturing into the new country. Yet being encumbered with the care of three orphaned children, was she a person to risk the hardships and the dangers of a rough life on the frontier?

Victor North thought not. The letters he had

from her he kept exclusively to himself, and he even jubilated that her fostering of two small nephews and a niece would be the responsibility anchoring her to that region of security and safe living in eastern Ohio. He would return to her there—and would return alone.

This being, at least, his sentimental programme, the Pacific West with its multiplicity of golden opportunities staunchly withheld from him all its gainful chances. California, to such a man, could be merely a place of exile where one waits until his brother, a spiritual cripple, can be put back firmly upon his feet. Once this fraternal obligation should be faithfully discharged, all the mines of that region recently acquired from Mexico and now much war-disturbed through efforts of the Confederacy to hold it for the South, would never suffice to keep him there.

In a desultory fashion, it is true, he and his brother tried to identify themselves with the country. They visited mining camps; they "prospected" a little; they went looking about "for an opening," as people say. But though a twelvemonth finally unwound itself, in this manner, from the snarled and unsatisfactory skein of Victor North's existence, it must be confessed that never, for a minute's time, had he been living here, but always back yonder, in Ohio, where remained that metal far more attractive than richest nuggets of Californian gold.

Formerly he had regretted deeply the guardianship responsibility which the death of a widowed sister had imposed upon Alice Arden; but now her situation was only to be regarded as a fortuitous circum-

stance. On the children's account, so he believed, she durst not hazard the uncertainty and mischances of pioneering. Surely she would not, she could not come West; and Harry North would not go East.

Very good! Especially good, seeing that she was no longer bound to Hal by the ties of betrothal.

Times innumerable Victor reviewed the episode of his brother's disgrace, particularly the confession—a scene affecting not only those most painfully concerned, but even the juvenile members of the household, especially the younger nephew, little Connie. For to the sensitive mind of childhood how mysteriously vivid are the moments of inexplicable trouble and domestic crisis!

On that distraught morning, in the opening stage of the unhappy conference, the gay, chirpy voices in the bedroom upstairs had been heard below, as soldiers may hear the singing of a lark during the grim business of battle. The little boys had begun dressing themselves, and were having a frolic over it, a regular giggling fit.

Presently their laughter came to an end, for they could not help growing absorbed in something curious, something to be felt with their bare feet. Their soles had begun to tingle slightly with faint vibrations of the floor which must have been caused by the peculiar resonance of the voice of one whom the children knew as Dockey North. Downstairs he was talking very fast. He was talking in a strange, new way. The boys could not hear what he said; but what they felt seemed to them unusual and startling.

Connie wanted to find out, at once, about this

queer thing; and so ran away, half undressed, without waiting for Arthur to button him up behind. He was nearly downstairs when he stopped on a step where a slice of sunshine lay. He liked that yellow streak; it felt so good and warm to his feet! When he held up one of them against the window, where the strong light came squirting in, it amused him to see his toes turn from pink to red, with a wonderful redness, like five little embers brightly glowing.

For a time he was more interested in them than in the excited talk; but as one and another of those in the front room continued to speak, he recognized each of them. Old Doctor Malcolm, from next door, seemed terribly cross about something. Now Victor North talked a little; and now, in a hushed, frail voice, Aunt Alice put in a word; and later Dockey North would be going it again in a sharp, harsh, nervous way.

None of the talk was a good kind. The silences in it, the strain of it, the halting intervals and waits!

"No, I better clear out—go West," Doctor North was saying.

"Not that," Alice implored. "You mustn't!"

One felt the quake of some person walking about. It must be heavy Doctor Malcolm who tramped like that—tramped and tramped, and finally stopped.

Then the deep young voice that gave you a tingle said with a snap:

"But yes, I must. That's it; clear out, go West, quit the practice of medicine. Drop it for good!"

The little boy had a feeling of naughtiness and guilt when he turned the knob, and warily slipped into the front room. Doubtless the general tone

of the scene, and the trouble in it, made him feel ashamed; for he stopped short, much frightened, and expecting to be sent away.

"Felt all right. Perfectly so," Doctor North went on. "Laid out the instruments, got ready. Never felt more competent. Head clear as a bell. And then—I don't know—— The heat, perhaps. Everything went black."

That belated tipsiness after a convivial evening may treacherously cause everything to go black, the little boy, of course, was not to understand. But a miserable feeling had come to him. He wanted to run to his Aunt Alice, and be caught up in her arms.

Victor North, likewise, had a frightened look; and being the only one to notice the child, he took the little boy by the arm.

"Go away, young man," he said, and Connie was thrust from the room.

Always before the little boy had been petted by that very friendly Victor North. And now to be pushed about by him! Now to be called "young man"! The child plumped right down on a step, and began to cry.

Even to be rescued from there, and taken away to the kitchen by Cousin Hattie, did not help much. For she had brusque, scraggy ways, this Cousin Hattie; her kisses prickled; she never had any of the warmth and smiling kindness, none of the bloom and fragrance and laughter which glorified his Aunt Alice.

In the after months Victor North used to wonder whether that girl of mothering ways and tenderness with children was still keeping her freshness and some of her laughter. Very likely she would be

wanting to get away, he thought, from that town of distressing associations; but for her to come out to the new country with those pioneering Harrises—no, that would not be the thing for her. Certainly not! She, with those three orphans on her hands!

The frontier would hardly be suitable for her, he wrote, even if the necessity arising through the death of the children's parents had not demanded of her that she continue her guardianship of those two nephews—one four, one six—and of Florence, their sister, now coming into her tenth year. Victor did not conceal from Alice Arden that he regarded it as a scheme altogether fantastic, this intimated notion of hers about coming West with Captain and Mrs. Harris. In every way possible, through his passionate self-interest, the young man meant to oppose the plan and triumphantly discourage it.

But, as it fell out, Alice Arden had not been discouraged. She had come.

During the term of the Norths' sojourn in California, Victor eventually received letters which told of the Nebraska community where she, the children, and her friends, had finally settled. Once she explained that Tecon, the name of the hamlet on the Elkhorn River, was derived from the Omaha words *te* for buffalo, and *con* meaning pale. She had heard it said that the sacred white buffalo of the tribes folk had been taken captive not far from where the village now stood.

Since cheap government land, along the river, could be had at a dollar and a quarter an acre, sightly tracts of hill and wooded ravine would serve acceptably for adjoining homesteads, one farm to be

held by the Harrises under the preëmption law, and the other by herself.

Upon their arrival in the settlement she had counted a half-dozen cabins widely separated. It amused her that the projectors (with an ambitious eye for the future) had put this meagre neighbourhood on their map with showy pretentiousness, not as a village, nor yet as a town, but as Tecon City. It hoped to have a college; it wanted to be the capital of Nebraska Territory; but it began with a trading post called the Red Store.

The court house and the public school might be conspicuous as possibilities; they might even be boldly marked, in red ink, on the plat of the Townsite Company, but one could see for one's self that at least a blacksmith shop, with its blue-black and smoky interior, had become an actuality. A charred jumble of burnt timbers and gray ash showed where the stage station used to stand; and that a new one was to be erected might be heard screechingly proclaimed by a shingle machine actively operated by two men.

Residence having been effectively established in Tecon, the girl pioneer had at first been robustly cheerful—and hopeful, too; but finally the time arrived when she could no longer cling to the faith that all, in the end, must come right. She had received no letter from Doctor North. Autumn darkened into winter; November had passed; December was passing; and finally the time came round for the settlement to make merry in celebrating its first Christmas.

Still no word from the man she loved!

CHAPTER II

Holiday Time

WHEN the women of the committee went to see Seth Miller, who keeps the Red Store in Tecon City, he said it would be all right to hold the Christmas festival in the hall upstairs. They could have the hall rent free. Only he did not want to take the bright tin-foil off his plug tobacco. He also objected to removing the green tissue paper from his stock of spun wool and yarn. But the paper and the foil, he was told, were indispensable. For the Christmas tree should be dressed, shouldn't it?

Being a horribly naked tree, a leafless box elder, it would require a lot of dressing. If only a fir or an evergreen were to be had! But no, these sparse woods along the Elkhorn River produced nothing of that sort. Too bad they didn't. The scraggy box elder would have to be made green with paper.

"You don't say so!" Seth Miller observed, trying to look interested; yet for the life of him he could not see why a box elder or even a cottonwood tree might not serve well enough for a celebration without having green paper stuck all over it. In the end he acceded, as gracefully as possible, to the demands of the committee. He even gave the women some tin scraps that could be made into bright ornaments.

Learning finally that the tree (all fussed up with paper and jim-cracks and grown inflammable as tow) would have lighted candles on it, Seth put his foot down on the whole affair. He was vastly afraid of fire. Ever since the stage-station had burned down he could hardly sleep for fear something might happen to the Red Store. Never did the community hold a public meeting of any sort but that Seth Miller would be on hand to advocate strongly the ploughing of fire-guards.

Naturally it could only be regarded as unfortunate that anything had been said about candles on the Christmas tree; but Mrs. "Cap" Harris would, of course, rise to this occasion.

"Come," she said, "hand over that bunch of metal scraps and tin-foil and green paper. Thanks. But shame on you, Seth Miller, to think we could get along without candles. Can't be done. Children wouldn't give shucks for a Christmas tree that wasn't gay and all lit up. So, I tell you what you better do. Just have a barrel of water and a bucket handy when we light the candles."

The storekeeper said nothing. He took snuff out of a little box that had a lady painted on the cover. But you couldn't make out whether she was a pretty lady, for in the place where his thumb came he had pasted a piece of paper, so that her face would not get rubbed off.

He must have considered it good advice that Mrs. Harris had given. Only he exceeded her suggestion, providing himself with *two* water-barrels. On the night of the entertainment he sat near them, right up in front, with a bucket between his knees, as if he

were going to milk a cow. He fidgeted, took snuff repeatedly; he was in misery the whole evening.

It had been needless, all the same, to be so perturbed; for nothing happened—nothing serious. Once, to be sure, a twig of the green-papered tree flared like a little torch; but instantly someone put out the flame. Everybody said that the box elder, being lit with many candles, and glittering all over, made a brave show. In addition to the festoons of white popcorn, the scarlet berries of bittersweet had been threaded together in clusters, and caught in the branches to give brilliant notes of colour.

Many people, some coming from far-away homesteads, attended the festival; and after Sophia Billings, the village poetess, had started to read "the piece" she had composed about "Our First Christmas Tree," she was interrupted by a noise of boisterous men coming up the outside stairs. They were very hilarious. Some of them hooted like a war party of Indians; others began bellowing that familiar freighters' song:

> My name is Joe Bowers,
> I've got a brother Ike;
> I come from old Missouri,
> All the way from County Pike.
> I'll tell you how I came here,
> And how I came to roam,
> And leave my good old mammy,
> So far away from home.

It was not the thing to have those roystering fellows come in here, with their yells and their guffaws and their song-howling. Mrs. Cap Harris stood up at once, and pointed to the back of the hall.

"Cass Fisher," she shouted, "the committee appoints you doorkeeper and sergeant-at-arms. We women have spent a lot of time and hard work on this entertainment, and we don't want it spoiled. You're appointed and empowered to keep order. You mustn't let any boys in here that are tanked too much."

"Don't want the job," Cass Fisher loudly demurred. He himself was red-faced, inclined to be noisy, and in truth, he had much annoyed people with his loud talking.

"You've *got* to be doorkeeper," Mrs. Harris insisted.

"I ain't fixed for it," he objected.

"You ain't? What's the reason you ain't? You've got your guns on."

It was true; for Cassius Fisher, being frequently employed as an express guard, was the sort of man who would as lief go without trousers as to go without his brace of six-shooters.

"That ain't it," he protested. "But you see, now—— Dat bust it, I've took some on board myself. I'm a little tight. I ain't fixed to keep order."

"Yes, you are. And you've got it to do."

"Well, if that's how it's got to be—all right, then, if that's it."

He strode over to the door, clumping heavily and elbowing people aside. Then, by way of welcoming the noisy contingent, he prodded their leader with his elbow, and hammered for silence with a heavy revolver.

"Quit yellin'!" he commanded. "Shut your yaps, all of yous. Where's your manners? This ain't no

dog fight. This here's a show, a good show, a regular Christmas show. The ladies has been to an awful expense to get it up. And what we got to do is to help out. So crawl along here, every mother's coyote of you. Come up, and flop something into the hat."

It was a curious offering he collected: pocket-knives, poker-chips, buttons, silver coins, little wads of gold dust, and even some nuggets. Later, the hat having been carried up front and emptied, the sergeant-at-arms returned to his post.

"Boys," he said, rejoining the hilarious newcomers, "it's too rotten hot in this hall. If we stay here, our little headies might get to achin'. I reckon we all better go back to Mike's and wet up."

Out of the hall and down the stairs he led the boisterous merrymakers. Their heavy descent and the bellowing of the song about Joe Bowers jarred the windows.

> There was a gal in our town
> Her name was Sally Black;
> I asked her for to marry me,
> She said it was a whack.
> Says she to me, "Joe Bowers,
> Before we hitch for life
> You ought to have a little home
> To keep your little wife."

This ballad of many verses, punctuated with occasional howls, diminished steadily in volume, growing fainter and fainter, and finally dying quite away.

After the programme had been carried out, and the

last carol sung to an end, with a wheezy organ as accompaniment, Ace Thomas shouted out the suggestion that everybody stay, push back chairs and benches, and make a night of it. Of course, making a night of it meant a dance.

So the Methodists began to go home at once. Elder Wiggins was for staying awhile, and even squeezed in among men about the stove. But Mrs. Wiggins promptly sought him out, haled him forth, and so removed him from what she called "this godlessness."

Seth Martin let it be known that he himself most decidedly did not favour the dance. He was strongly of the opinion that the hall was too little. Scarcely room enough, he said, to run two sets! His real objection, of course, could be nothing else than that the quaking of the floor would be sure to shake down dust over his stock of dry goods.

It proved an easy matter to have his objection overruled. He was merely told, briefly and emphatically, not to be so fussy!

Ace Thomas told him so, although the truth later came out that Ace himself was not a dancer. What he wanted was to show off the terpsichorean ability of his wife's mother, a much-wrinkled little woman wearing a lacy white cap, a white fichu, and a gray dress. She, it appears, had come through all her sixty-seven years with the joy of youth still shining in her faded eyes. Ace offered to bet five dollars that not a young fellow in the whole assembly could dance her down.

At first the proposed revel looked a little doubtful, seeing that the Methodists had emphasized their

protest by locking up the melodeon, an instrument to be used for praise service only. In times past it had been placed at the disposal of Baptists, Catholics, Episcopalians, and had even been offered to the Mormons; but to let it be given over to the works of Satan—never!

Some of the godless declared, however, that it would not be much of a trick to force the organ open. Still, that was not the thing to do. Swede Norstrom, the wheelwright, brought his Old Country accordeon, Dooley fetched his fiddle, and Butch Swartzlander, once the leader of a brass band in Toledo, went after his cornet.

Alice did not care to stay. Her attendance here had been for the children, duty rather than desire; and now the need of putting them to bed (Connie had indeed gone to sleep in her lap) might well be made her pretext for going home. She must have felt, besides, a certain fastidious shrinking from contact with uncouth personalities and rough hands; for she had not yet adapted herself to the broad, free-hearted social conditions of the frontier. Often it vexed her that she could not make herself unreservedly a part of the new life. But there it was. She did not want any of these gawky young men for a dancing partner, and was equally unwilling to offend any of them by refusal.

So, with the little boy in her arms, she rose to depart, while all around her the hall resounded with the liveliest commotion. Chairs scraped, benches were pushed back. Everywhere bustle, flurry, rollicking energy! Dark window-panes the women used for mirrors, giddy girls laughed, little boys scam-

pered, the orchestra began tuning up, and in no time at all the Virginia reel was forming. Four couples, six couples, eight couples, other couples on the way! The last of them too late, and laughing that the floor was already full. Such a romping of feet, such a skip and swing and clatter, such a saluting of partners and gay prancing up and down the centre!

By the time the dance began Alice had shepherded her prankish nephew and coaxing niece out of the vortex of merriment; and it was not until Florence stood on a chair to hold the blue cloak for the enfolding of her aunt's shoulders that the girl pioneer changed her mind, saying with tremulous resolution:

"No, after all, give it to me."

With the garment she snugly wrapped up the sleeping child, and put him to bed on chairs against the wall, exactly in the manner that mothers had disposed of their babies and small sleepyheads.

"I'll stay awhile. I'll dance," Alice announced, and laughed in rather a strained, unnatural way.

And she did dance. She really did. She was gay, almost giddy about it. Of young cheeks flushing, none brightened more than hers; of eyes aglow with youth and excitement, none had in them a lustre half so strange. She gave herself to the cadence of the music; she waltzed gayly with the best of the men waltzers; she went on turning and swaying in a very ecstasy of joy.

Or was it joy? What if this feverish activity were only meant to oppose some heart-clutching dread? At times, indeed, a strong shudder passed over her, for through all this Christmas revel and dancing frolic danced also her defiance of a depressing possibility.

If Harry North should never again be the one to hold her in his arms—well, what of that? She went on dancing as those do who betray a giddiness of soul which discreeter years would hide. It was a manner of challenging self-assertion, as who would say:

"I can and will be happy. I need not be crushed by useless yearning. If he does not come to me, if he is never to come, why, what of that? If he chooses to stay away, let him. I don't care, I don't care, I don't care!"

So, as the music thrilled, and the floor palpitated, none of those here making festival seemed gayer than she; none had cheeks more warmly flushed or eyes more wondrously aglow.

Yet afterward, on the way home, no trace remained of all this exaltation nervously forced. It had done more than die out; it had left her with an immense fatigue, an aching emptiness, and a poignant longing for the one she had been striving so assiduously to forget.

CHAPTER III

A Glad Surprise

MARBLE time had come. Already the Red Store was offering a window display of potties, glassies, and commies, and in this green-and-gold season of spring no boy in Tecon City had been earlier than Arthur to make a purchase, so that now his pockets rattled with clickety sounds wherever he went.

One day while he was trying to introduce to some Indian boys the marble games he knew, his little brother went off to play with the clouds that kept on passing up there, far, far up against the blue sky. Connie fancied that they were following him. If he went to the right he would see them, the whole fluffy flock, going also to the right; if he stood still he felt that they, likewise, had stopped.

All at once Connie grew conscious that at the edge of the woods a little brown boy, a bit smaller than himself, stood looking at him. The child from the cabin went nearer by a few steps, then stopped. For some moments these two wee men did nothing but regard each other very solemnly.

Holding a bow and some blunt-headed arrows, the child from the woods wore his black hair in two tight braids, and a bit of white shell adorned each ear, and fringe ornamented the sleeves of his doeskin shirt.

Did he have any pockets? Connie at once put his hands into the side pouches of his little breeches, thus plainly demonstrating that he, at least, had pockets. He even turned them wrong side out, to emphasize the distinction.

The expression of the little brown boy did not change; he only kept on looking.

Little brother, having emptied his pockets, made a display of their contents, pouring some small articles from one hand into the other. He had a brass tack, a stub of slate pencil, some string, a spool, a glass button, and a bit of beeswax, good to chew. The tack and the button he enticingly held out, and the little brown boy received them, but did not smile or say anything.

What most impressed Connie, in regard to this uncommunicative stranger, were the pretty moccasins, with their toes brightened with some kind of red embroidery made of coloured porcupine quills.

Little brother bent down, touched the bright needlework with a finger, and then looked up, smiling. Shyly and timorously, the stranger smiled a little, too; and immediately Connie thought of something else. He darted away and came skylarking back; but apparently the serious stranger did not know that the little white boy was expecting to be chased. All at once, when Connie looked behind to see if he were being followed, he halted in astonishment. The little brown boy was no longer there. He had dissolved into the green hush of the woods.

Connie felt duped. Having accepted the fine present, the tack and the button, a stranger should not behave in this fashion. A mean trick!

Such a sense of injury was the gift-giver's that presently, when the little brown fellow came skipping forth from a leafy covert, the white child would only sulk and turn aside.

The boy of the woods had the quiet of a cat. His bow and arrows having been hidden away, he now appeared with some Indian dainties in his hand. Probably they were wild cherries, pounded into a cake with buffalo tallow. He also had some sugar made from the sap of the box elder tree; for children of the Omaha tribe are given these luxuries from time to time, as a special treat.

With a pretty grace, shy as a fawn, the brown child advanced, holding out his hand in friendly offering. But Connie would have none of the candies. He peevishly struck the little brown hand, and marched away.

But was not pleased with himself. He knew he had behaved badly; he even had the impulse to turn back and show regret, and try to make things right. With a choking in his throat he really did look back. Only now it was too late. There was nothing. Once again the little brown boy had vanished.

Connie tramped up the hill, very angry with himself, crying and blowing his nose. He even violated the rules for blowing your nose. He did not use his handkerchief, but put his thumb against a nostril in the fashion which the *bull whackers* have. It was not nice to do so; it was naughty; and that is why little brother did it. He *wanted* to be naughty. He wanted to do the worst kind of badness that anybody *can* do.

And he continued to cry. He cried all the way

along, and the running of his tears blurred everything, made everything seem to swim.

Coming into the path, with his eyes all blinded from their drench of tears, he suddenly gave himself an unexpected bump. A pair of legs had come in front of him. Then he felt himself caught off the ground, he heard comforting words, he heard a grave and masculine voice kindly saying:

"There, there, Connie! What is it? Have you hurt yourself?"

Once the child had been carried up the hill, to the cabin, the man paused at the threshold; and although the door stood open, he did not enter. Only the warm sunshine entered. It streamed aslant, forming a sharp-cut rectangle on the floor.

Florence, bending over the ironing board, did not look up. She was carefully pressing something from which little wavering wisps of vapour rose. The sampler, that tedious piece of needlework done in gay colours, had at last been finished. Yes, finished —an artistic performance finally accomplished and now having the wrinkles taken out of it.

Connie, who had been put down on the doorstep, began to prance and dance. Tears were forgotten. He was all glee and excitement.

"Look, Floy! Look-ee! See who's come. It's Dockey. He picked me up, Dockey did. He carried me."

"Oh!" Florence could speak no more than that. The flatiron clanked down upon its horseshoe holder.

Doctor North went up to the little girl at once, and between his palms he pressed her smooth face, with cheeks all rosily pinked with the heat of the

ironing. He did not say anything; but she knew, surely, what his eyes were saying; for often and often he had looked at her like that, sometimes telling her, "You have the eyes of your Aunt Alice." Florence had always known, somehow, that she was ever a greater favourite with the young doctor than her two brothers.

Now, when he started to say something, he had to stop and clear his voice. "Some day," he said, "you are going to be just such another woman as your Aunt Al. And where is she, your Aunt Alice?"

Too excited to answer rationally, the little girl uttered the first thing, anything at all, that she could think of saying. "I didn't know it was you. I was pressing this—this—— And there you were. It's a sampler. It's for Doctor Malcolm's birthday. It got wrinkled, and I—— Now, now, Connie, your thumb!"

Blushing with shame, the little boy jerked his thumb out of his mouth; for big boys do not suck thumbs. Only babies do. With a plop! the thumb came forth, as a cork from a bottle. The child looked up; he dug his hands into his pockets, very like a man.

"See, I got 'em!" he announced with head-wagging seriousness. "Pockets! And maybe, some day, you are going to get me boots, the same as Arthur has."

"Now that you mention it, perhaps I am. Boots, eh? Impossible to get along without boots."

Still resenting his sister's chiding about the thumb, Connie boasted triumphantly:

"I saw him first. He carried me."

Doctor North did not smile very well. His mouth twitched too much. It twitched again as he quietly inquired:

"Your Aunt Alice—will she be here soon?"

"If," said Florence, skipping gayly to the window, "if you look down there, by the river—— No, you can't see her. She's below the bank, she's rinsing the clothes. Say, I tell you: let's go down, all of us —let's go down there, and s'prise her."

"No, my dear, that would scarcely be the thing. Run, Florence. Go to her. Tell her, please, that somebody has come. Make her guess. That's the best way."

Florence whisked out of the house, running like a mad thing, while Doctor North stood at the window, looking eagerly after her. As he waited, tingling all over with the abashed eagerness of lovers, he grew aware of a fragrance, thin and warm and delicate; for creamy blossoms, the wild cherry sweetly in flower, pendently languished over the rim of a blue pitcher, an old delft pitcher, well remembered.

"I," said Connie, "I helped to pick the flowers."

"Did you, now?" Doctor North went on looking at that marvel of a little pathway, while the excitement of high-keyed anticipation showed itself in his rapid breathing.

As the little girl, meanwhile, skipped along the winding trail down to the river, her feet fairly danced, her arms danced, too; her laughing eyes danced best of all.

Florence thought she would only have to pant out the words, "He's come," and then Aunt Al would drop everything. She would drop everything, and

hurry right away up the slope, not even taking time to wipe her wet hands and arms.

But no; that was not, after all, the effect of the news. With unnatural coolness the announcement was received. Alice went on wringing out a garment. She was very slow, very calm. But her face was white. Her hands, all pink and puckered from being in the water so long, were screwing into a hard twist some kind of white cloth. It dripped, and the drippings blazed in the sun in a fall of rainbow fire-beads.

Alice said: "He's come, then—really?" She thwacked the clean log with the garment, in order to untwist the cloth, before tossing it into the basket. Next she stood up. "How does he look?" she asked. After towelling her hands and arms with her apron, she put her palms at her back, as if it ached a little from bending over. "Does he look well?—— Just came, did he?—— My hair," she added at once, touching it about the temples, "is it all mussed up? Is he, the doctor—has he turned gray?"

Florence could not tell. She only knew that he had come. Yes, just come. He was up there, right up there at the house, and waiting.

Alice smoothed and patted her coppery ringlets, trying to examine the blurred reflection of her face in a pool. "The washing," she said, "could have been finished to-morrow. I thought of letting it go. I meant to change my dress—the blue delaine. He likes blue. His favourite colour. I remember the time he told me so. One night, on the way home from Singing School—— Is he much changed?" She looked down at her crumpled skirt, and shook

her head. "Dear me," she exclaimed, "this shabby, faded, worn old thing!"

Into her face had come a warm and summery look, so that Florence marvelled at it, as who would say: "Oh, the lovely smile!" The little girl could scarcely believe in this amazing change. For one of the queer facts about Alice Arden was this: she was the whole of two years past twenty—that shocking old age—and yet it had been possible for her to grow suddenly very young. When she started up the hill she walked lightly and easily; she seemed hardly to touch the ground.

CHAPTER IV

Doubtful Joy

IT IS written in the play that love goes toward love like schoolboys from their books; and surely when lovers meet after doubts and racking anxieties, and more than a year of separation, the meeting should be more than joyous. But if a girl has been kept waiting over long for such a moment, what then? And if her bright vision of a future full of promise has been shadowed, almost to extinction, by the gloom of an ignoble circumstance blotting the past, how is she to feel a soaring exaltation of mood?

North observed her as she came. He watched for the deft and prim little grace with which she used to raise her dress in front as she mounted a doorstep. How many times he had seen her do that, as she started upstairs! and always with her fingers curving in a way that was like the way of nobody else. Each small gesture and every movement of her head had endeared itself to him as quaintly individual, precise, and charming with the kind of pretty artlessness that children are likely to have.

She walked in the manner familiar to him; erect, with raised chin; but he was distinctly surprised that she should seem taller than formerly and a bit angular, not so lithe, nor so graceful. And though she

smiled, what a different smile it was! The lips, to be sure, still had the wine of youth to redden them; but what had gone with their flexible winsomeness, that blithe look which had impelled him to give the mouth of Winnie Barton such particular notice?

Heavily self-conscious, North greeted Alice, and it seemed to him that he was overdoing the joyousness which he tried to feel but couldn't. He kissed her, too; he brought himself to that. But why do such a thing? He actually asked himself, "Why?" He had prepared himself not to do it; and now, all the same, it was done. The strange thing was that once the two had kissed, they continued to embrace, cleaving together not as lovers do, but like little children lost in the frightful dark, and desperately trying to comfort each other.

How embarrassing, besides, to feel that this situation had somehow transferred itself into that other scene, when he had said farewell to Alice! Then, as now, he felt what she did not speak as plainly as if it had been spoken!

"If only you could have been induced to stop your needless, unprofessional, strength-sapping habit of card-playing fellowship with racy youths of the town!"

They drank, those young men; they went on sprees. Even if true that they had won for themselves more notoriety than they deserved, that fact could not eliminate what had happened. Life, certainly, could not be restored to Mrs. Joseph Wheeler, nor to the child which should have been born to her. At the most critical moment, as young Doctor North had confessed, "everything went

black." To this day, even now as he held Alice Arden in his arms, the world could not regain its brightness for him.

All through the brief visit, the two were like strangers who must work hard at the business of getting acquainted. They even groped for something to talk about. They used Victor for conversational purposes.

In Omaha, was he? And thinking of settling on a homestead? Good! A very good idea; for eventually this farming country would be developed and grow extremely valuable.

They held to this topic. They spoke, also, of what crops could best be grown in the new country. Potatoes and hay came in for a liberal amount of discussion. Also the railroad. President Lincoln favoured it. Government support of the project had been voted by Congress, so that the gigantic undertaking, a line from the Missouri River across the Great Plains and mountains, clear to the western coast, was now positively assured.

"Surveying parties," the visitor added, "are already in the field. I have had it in mind to join one of them. My application is filed. Men are needed for the work. And that sort of activity, with a tang of adventure in it, might be something, I thought, to interest me."

Rather faintly Alice inquired:

"California, then, didn't interest you?"

"I wouldn't say that. Only Vic, the same as myself, never got over feeling unsettled, restless, dissatisfied. Abundant business chances, but no, he didn't care for them. Wanted to come East."

"And you?" The girl had striven, with fair success, to make her question sound casual.

"Oh, I—of course—did not mind coming as far East as the Missouri. Omaha would be my destination. For awhile, in California, I assisted a county surveyor. Plenty of field work. Put in my spare time with the study of civil engineering. Reached Omaha with a letter introducing me to the chief of the Union Pacific surveys."

North was thinking, as he looked at her:

"If she sends the children away, then what? Then I shall tell her, maybe, that I could never get her out of my mind. I tried to; I wanted to; and yet, somehow—and maybe I could have joined a railway surveying party as well on the Pacific Coast as on the Missouri River."

Until this interview with Alice Arden he would not have believed that her influence had much to do with drawing him hitherward. Had he expected to see her again? He had not. And yet that anticipation, that vague hope must have stuck in his heart.

"In Omaha," North went on, "I've been on the waiting list. For some time the chief engineer had nothing to offer. Meanwhile, we have been debating, Victor and I, the advisability of taking a homestead. Rich land in this Elkhorn Valley, good claims, not far from here, are to be had. Aren't they?"

His face had reddened. He grew more and more self-conscious. It went so far with him that presently, when Florence left for the post-office, taking little brother with her, Harry North could do no better for some time than merely utter a few desultory remarks. Then he stopped talking. A dull

silence lengthened to an interval awkwardly uncomfortable.

Presently the visitor decided to inquire about the knitting Alice had taken up. What was it?—a stocking? A stupid question! He did not ask it. Finally he said:

"Do you know what? I had thought never to see you again. But here now, after all—— Only I couldn't, at first, believe it when Vic said you were here. Then, believing it—— Oh, the fight I had with myself not to rush here at once! You were here, I was there in Omaha. Both of us in the same county. Incredible! And I did not go away. Was accepted for service in the railway engineering corps. The awaited opportunity had come. But still I did not take it. Went on staying there in Omaha. Thought I wouldn't; didn't intend to, but—stayed. Finally came. Impossible not to come."

"Sometimes," Alice began, and with a hairpin strove determinedly to pick up a dropped stitch, "sometimes I almost gave up."

"Gave up?"

"Yes. There was so little, Hal, to let me go on hoping."

It was now, for the first time, that passion throbbed in his voice. The ardour, the old intensity, a kind of fierce joy could not be driven from his gray eyes or from his face, no matter how sternly he might declare:

"Better for you, my dear, if you *hadn't* hoped. Better—much better if I could have stuck to my purpose never to see you again!"

He hardly knew how it happened; but all at once

he found himself clasping her close. She had been caught up out of her chair, and she clung to him, trembling. But when she spoke, her hushed and deliberate voice remained absolutely firm.

"If I had never seen you again," she was saying, "I should, at least, have gone on thanking God, all my days, that I had known and loved you."

In the later moments of this reuniting Harry North tried to tell of the letter he had written, of how he had been temporarily released from the heart-searchings, and how the reckless impulse to write had been roused in him by the prattling nonsense of a queer sort of girl, Winifred Barton by name.

"Who would have dreamed," he suddenly exclaimed, "that you would be coming off out here! You, with the children!"

She answered in self-depreciation:

"Captain and Mrs. Harris were coming. They wanted us along. They urged me, especially Mrs. Harris."

"You would be glad to get away. Of course! For people, back there, would pity you, and you could never stand it to be pitied."

"That's it—partly," she agreed. "But, Hal, can't you see what really brought me?—the main thing? Oh, you must know, surely, that it would only be the hope of such a day as this that could give me the courage to come!"

For the moment a kind of solemn joy came to Harry North, but when he went away, after dinner, it was with a certain sense of relief. He was humbled, too; for holding her so high above him, he could not have the audacity to believe that her level would ever

be attainable by him. He could only say to himself, as he left the house:

"Well, this much is over."

In going down the hill he glanced back. Her voice was not merely subdued, but even a little timorous, as she said:

"To-morrow, then."

"Yes, to-morrow," he answered, and waved his hat. "We'll be here—depend on it—be here to-morrow, Vic and I."

PART III

SHADOWS

CHAPTER I

Called for Consultation

ON THE western side of the Elkhorn River the cabin of the Norths spanned the section line; and thus, with one house on the two homesteads, they were establishing residence on their government land in a manner satisfactory to the requirements of the preëmption laws.

Not exactly pleasant, but easily bearable this fraternal partnership might have been, if only Victor had not come to realize that what chiefly depressed him was less a toilsome existence than it was his jealous concern for someone else.

Jealous? And why be jealous? Could Alice ever mean anything so very special to his life? He had again resigned himself, hadn't he? to the necessity of being a brother-in-law.

He was glad, all the same—extravagantly so—that her shattered romance had not yet been pieced together. The hope was even his, strive as he would to thrust it from him, that the sun might never rise on the wedding day of Alice Arden and Dr. Harry North.

Eventually the notion came to the elder brother that it must be a painful embarrassment for her to see his pity and his deep understanding of all she had been through. He feared, besides, that his well wishing for her might presently ripen once again into

the self-interest he had struggled so zealously to weed out of his heart.

Love? Was it that? He tried to keep on denying the thing it was, yet despite all wilful negation of what was in his heart, there it remained. Tyrannously it had come back to him, and must abide with him, obstinately defying his every effort to drive it out.

Well, let it stay. Give it welcome. Modest, discreet, humble, and without hope, let it be the kind of love which expresses itself in service. The lover of her choosing he had safely brought back to her. In that, at least, he had been magnanimous. It was service.

Or was it? What good might accrue? Had he helped or only hindered? Instead of good, the thing he had accomplished might turn out no better than bad—a stupid and mischievous meddling!

While at his toil in the field it was nothing unusual for Victor North thus to assault himself with insurgent questionings. One day, giving no heed to the reins looped about his body, he had grown unmindful of the times when the mule team went awry, for he was guiding the corn-cultivator in a manner carelessly automatic.

Ahead of him the furrows suddenly burst into a flurry of dark wings, black-blue and glossy—a great raucous chorus of scolding crows which here had been making festival by pulling up the tender plants, in order to get at the soft kernels of germinated seed still clinging to the roots. The worker ignored these bird-vandals and their saucy ways; he seemed utterly unconscious of their cawing perturbation as they circled in a wide sweep, to settle down once again to their impudent robberies.

At the end of the corn row the ear-wagging work-animals came to a halt, and there grazed avidly, biting off the long grass with brisk and tearing sounds, while the shadow of Victor's body, lying like a dark mantle close about his dusty boots, indicated the noon hour.

Some time elapsed before he grew aware that a resonant voice from the other side of the field, in the direction of the cabin, was distinctly calling him: the dinner summons of his brother.

"All right, all right! Coming!" answered the man, still standing at the grassy verge of the ploughed ground, where three milkweeds, with tops bitten off, were now exuding a white sap. Victor hooked up the sides of the cultivator, its polished shovels gleaming like concave mirrors.

While drawing near the cabin, after the mules had been watered, stalled, and fed, he scented the warm aroma of steaming coffee. His brother was also broiling a venison steak; but the meal, a very good meal, seemed like forage rather than cooked food.

The Norths talked little. The far-away look in Victor's face, as he emptied plate and tin cup, clearly indicated that he had gone into a brown study. His brother, having something special to say, waited meanwhile for attention, and presently went to the open door, there to gaze absently through the heat quiver toward the silver rim of the river.

"Say, Vic."

"Well?"

"There's a telegram. This morning—a message——"

Neither of the men looked at the other.

"Telegram?" Victor questioned.

Harry North held forth the dispatch, and then brought from the clock-shelf a letter containing a second letter. "You see," he added, "Winifred's telegram confirms the report which old Rollins had some one write for him. You can see he has been as delicate as possible in giving her the news:

"Now, Win, I don't want to tell it scarey; but you know your own self that stampedes is awful dangersome."

The young man paused in his reading of the communication to answer the inquiring look in his brother's face. Having said, "Yes, she's with her father. Arrived last week, I believe," he went on with the Rollins letter:

"Down about Pawnee Fork is where we had the bobble. To get smashed up a lot and stick in the saddle six months afterwards keeps a man from feeling just right. We leave your pappy here at Fort Kearney, for the post surgeon to fix him up. The rest of us will drift on with the cattle to Denver. If you come out to Kearney you better not let him know where you got this news. It would hist his temper too much. But I figure you ought to know that he has got a bad hip joint, and a bad shoulder, and some tolerable bad language."

Smiling a little, Harry North finished the report of the old cowman. And Victor ventured the speculation: "A bit of a joke, that last. It's put in, I suppose, so that Winifred wouldn't feel he has been telling it 'scarey.' Well, have you answered her telegram? Shall you go to Fort Kearney?"

Should he? Apparently Harry North did not know what he ought to do.

After a long pause Victor spoke again:

"Anxious, and really urgent, isn't she?" He read the telegram aloud.

"You must come for consultation. Please do. My father has such faith in what you can do for him."

"Faith!" Harry North repeated. "How have faith? What can he know about me as a surgeon?"

"It may be," Victor suggested, "that he's clutching at straws. Old Rollins, you notice, declared him to be in 'bad shape,' and to be 'smashed up a lot.' Serious, of course. And then riding for six months after being so injured!"

Once more Harry North read the phrase of the telegram: "'My father has such faith.' Well," he went on, after expelling a deep breath, "if Alice thinks I had better go. . . ."

In the circumstances it might not have been at all unreasonable if she had cared very little for this professional opportunity. For the injured man had a daughter, and what an uncomfortable deal Alice Arden had been hearing about that daughter! Even though one is far from being a "cockleburr," as the Indians call a jealous woman, one may still have a feminine disposition quick to take alarm. Particularly so if a young man known to be notoriously a bad correspondent should have developed a certain zest for letter writing.

Having seen the importunate telegram from Winifred Barton, it would not have been strange if Alice had questioned within herself whether she ought to

deepen Hal's sympathetic regard for one reported to be glowingly beautiful, and odd, and wild, and full of capricious charms. But if you are a pioneer you are of those who live adventurously. Alice dared take risks, even as she had dared the first great risk of moving West with three orphaned children. So she said to Harry North:

"Just the thing! You must go, by all means. Old Doctor Malcolm, back home, will be so glad to hear that you've taken up the practice of medicine!"

Could it have been possible to mend a little this comment of hers, especially to eliminate the last of it, all might have been well. But in her eagerness to encourage Harry North she had accomplished quite the reverse. That reference to the old life, "back home," had done the mischief. By the paling of his lips Alice saw that the grim spectre of his ignoble past had once more been miserably evoked.

He spoke quietly, with bowed head:

"No, after all, I mustn't go. How could I have the cheek to think of going? I, who have spoiled my right to practise medicine!"

But the one-time doctor did write a letter. In the life history of Alice Arden, and in his own, it was to be a momentous letter; and yet neither of them could foresee what circumstances would result from this that he wrote to Winifred Barton:

For me to deny myself the privilege of going to your father is not an easy thing to do. You are to believe that I am more grateful for his faith in me than he, or you, will ever be likely to guess. But I must not, I cannot go. It is now impossible, since I no longer belong to the profession which once was mine—and very proudly mine.

CHAPTER II

"What Does He See in Her?"

TECON CITY is taking on a fine urban air of elegance. The Court House, to be sure, still remains a square space, marked in red, on the plat of the Town-site Company. The Public School, likewise, is a square space, marked in red. You are to understand, however, that one dwelling of the settlement has acquired the distinction of an exclusive dooryard neatly enclosed by a fence of white palings.

For all this municipal splendour it is still to be granted that no resident of the village could display anything so stylish as a French parasol brilliantly flame-coloured and in pattern exactly like those one sees in the fashion plates of *Godey's Lady's Book*. Neither can it be said that any girl of this frontier community had yet risen to sartorial sublimity so modishly gorgeous as a scoop bonnet of white straw scarletly adorned with ribbons shrillingly bright.

On a clear day (the stage-coach from the West having arrived) this parasol and this bonnet were seen to pause in the road near the river, very near the place where a footpath begins the ascent of the green slope toward a cabin topping the hill.

In the heat-quiver of late afternoon the pioneer abode up yonder appeared rather cool, an effect

largely due to the wild morning-glory vines verdantly spread over half the house.

While the bonnet gazed inquiringly at the cabin a little girl living there peeped covertly between sash-curtains, and presently whispered:

"She's waiting yet."

The child's aunt went on spreading down a cover for the earthen floor, a carpet of grain sacks pieced together.

"You should learn," she said, "not to make such a dust when you sweep."

Florence was not getting on well with the work, because she was too much interested in watching the parasol.

"Still there," she announced. "Waiting for the ferry boat to come back to this side of the river, so she can ask Tom who lives up here."

With head on one side Alice was eyeing the effect of an oval-shaped rug, one formed from braided rags and now carefully hiding the darned place in the carpet. Then, dabbing her heated face with a handful of apron, she caught sight of a spacious brown blotch on the stretched muslin of the ceiling.

"Oh," she sighed, "if only they didn't leak so, these prairie shingles!"

A roof of sods overlaid with dirt is not, in truth, well suited to withstand the drench of heavy rains. But even if the ceiling cloth were far from making a brave show, Alice and her small niece had contrived to give the place an air very inviting. The little girl continued to whisk about, wiping here and wiping there with a dustcloth, and reaching behind her back, with strange twists and wriggles, to get her apron

unbuttoned. Then she skipped back to the window, and awesomely delared:

"It's in, the ferry boat. He's telling her, Tom is. I saw his head go up and down."

Alice mentioned something about tea . . . hot day . . . so refreshing. But out here tea is nothing. Coffee's the thing. People *must* have their coffee. Florence was to bring in the milk-pail from the well, and skim off the cream.

"My shoes!" teased Connie.

But his aunt, with mightier business on hand, was saying to Florence:

"When Arthur comes home, send him to wash. He's not cleaned up."

"*I* am," little brother boasted. "Just rotten clean!"

Once the visitor had knocked and been sedately invited to enter, she was told that it was rather a hot day, wasn't it? And dusty, too. Looking cool in her blue lawn dress, despite her heightened colour, Alice tried to be politely casual when she asked the stranger to take a chair, but she also said, "Be seated."

Rather a curious effect the guest instantly produced. Lithe, graceful, and of average proportions, she still made the cabin seem small. It was as if she did not belong indoors, any more than the eagle, bird of the blue skies, belongs in a cage.

In the first moment, before the exchange of a syllable, the two young women had given each other the look which meant:

"What does he see in her?"

"I," the visitor announced with simple direct-

ness, "am Winnie Barton." She added that the North boys, maybe, had spoken of her. "Haven't they?" she asked, and the question was put with an engaging matter-of-factness.

Alice wanted to be cordial. Everything done in her busy few minutes had been accomplished, of course, for the sake of making a good impression. But she did not know whether she would be able to put any warmth into her voice.

"Oh, yes!" she said. "And have you brought your father?"

"He's down at the stage station. It's about him I've come to you." Whimsically the visitor smiled as she went on: "Only he's not much hurt. He says so. Insists that he's not. Wants it understood that he's only 'messed up a little.'"

"Do lay off your bonnet," Alice hospitably enjoined, "and make yourself quite at home, while I hook up the team, and go down to the stage station with the wagon. Our dinner is . . . We must have your father up here to dinner. It's almost ready, now."

"Can't be done," his daughter gravely asserted. "No, he couldn't possibly tear himself away from the dried-apple pies and the kind of coffee they have at the stage stations. I don't know how they make their coffee. Sometimes I think it's made of stewed boot-tops, and again I figure that it might be parched corn and axle-grease. And did you ever taste their dried-apple pies? No? Oh, what you have missed!"

Alice did better than smile; she even laughed a little. And she thought: "What a strange girl! Talks nonsense. Won't let herself be serious."

But Winifred had grown decidedly serious as she went on:

"No, please, don't go after him. It's nice to think of it, and he would like your kindness; but I just tell you how it is: he was always a fine figure of a man—straight and strong and big! And now to be so crippled up! You know what I mean. His pride is hurt. He couldn't stand it to have you being sorry for him. Even I have to let on that it's nothing bad ailing him. Lame; that's it. Smashed a little, but nothing to last. I'm told that it insulted him, right smart, to be helped into the saddle—him with his bad shoulder and crushed hip. At first, of course, he *had* to be helped; and several weeks the boys even made him ride in the chuck wagon. He scolds about it yet. Can't, somehow, get used to the notion that he's really hurt."

She smiled as a mother does at the pettish humours of a spoiled child, and with a certain droll unction described everything, even his suffering. When she paused it was to look all about, as who would say: "Isn't he the queer, dear, foolish old dad?"

"I can see," Alice answered, "how he would be sensitive. But he surely wouldn't mind if we sent him something—a tray, with a little dinner, now, while it's fresh and hot."

"That would be . . . yes, many thanks; he would like that. And," the prairie girl added, with a gratulatory smile, "he knows about you. He would want to show up good when he sees you. The North boys, you see, in their letters. . . . And each one of their nice letters I have sent on to my father."

The maternal sweetness which the sight of children is likely to put into a woman's face shone in the dark eyes of Winifred Barton. She was looking at the little boy, while Connie kept pressing himself against the blue skirt of his Aunt Alice.

Truth to tell, he did not feel complimented by the visitor's belated attention; for when one is such an important personage he would like to be promptly noticed. Connie knew *he* was important. Wearing shoes of a weekday, and being scoured so shockingly clean, made him feel tremendously important; and yet this lady with the folded parasol (which now lacked the brilliant glow that had delighted him when he saw it vividly red in the sunshine) this lady had only talked and talked, without looking at him. So now, when she did look, and even said, "That's Connie, isn't it?" he shyly slipped away behind his aunt.

Florence, being in the period of girlhood's rapid growth, felt slimmer and gawkier than common. The physical perfection of the visitor made the little girl yearn for a skirt long enough to hide her attenuated legs. She grew hot all over when the caller said: "And you are the one Doctor North likes especially to tell about. You must be Florence."

With a stiff little bow and a stiff little curtsey the blossomy-faced little girl stiffly asserted:

"Yes, I am Florence." Eager to say something that would sound natural, she betrayed the secret that the pewter platter (standing in its pride of place on the mantelshelf) was a household glory not used every day. "Shall we have this," she asked, "for the roast?"

"I was going to tell you," Alice answered, "to spread a napkin over it. We'll use it for a tray; and please rinse out the canteen, to carry the coffee in."

"Where's Flo going to carry the coffee?" the little boy inquired. "To the stage station? May I go, too? And carry the dinner tray? I'm strong!" he declared.

"Maybe Florence will let you carry the canteen."

Instead of protesting politely, as an Eastern woman might, that it would be a bother, and quite unnecessary to send a dinner down to the stage station for her father, the Western girl, accustomed to the ways of broad hospitality, said at once: "How he will enjoy something well cooked! And how nice of you to think of it!"

Presently the two children went off down the hill, with Florence walking very steadily. The napkin she had spread over the clinking dishes of the platter gleamed white in the sunshine, like a fresh coverlid of snow.

The two young women, left to themselves, again exchanged glances; but this time it was not the look which meant: "What does he see in her?" No, it was now a look of conflicting selfishness and generosity, of jealous and grudging admiration. How the situation stood could not have been better realized if Alice and Winifred had openly confessed that they wanted to like each other very much, and yet wondered whether the thing would be possible.

"I must be going now," the visitor announced. She leaned her parasol against the chair from which she had risen, and from the bright-coloured bag, the reticule of scarlet silk depending by ribbons from her

arm, she brought out a folded page and spread it open. "Here now," she went on, "this letter—see—from Doctor North. He doesn't practise any more. He won't take care of my father, maybe—not unless you ask him to. But you *will* ask him. Won't you?"

Alice did not know what to say. She looked at the ceiling sheet where bright reflections from the river wavered in a rippled dance. Some dark flecks passed across the bright folds of the muslin window-shade—the shadows, doubtless, of swallows cleaving the air with airy fleetness.

When, presently, Alice Arden ended the long pause, it was to say with regret:

"I am sure he wanted to go to your father at Fort Kearney. His brother and I tried to make him see that he really ought to go. But"—Alice paused, and moistened her lips—"I greatly doubt, Miss Barton, whether Harry North will ever practise medicine again."

CHAPTER III

Summoned

ACCEPTING, perforce, the care of a local physician named Rogers, the injured cattleman resigned himself as best he might to ministrations which could scarcely be less efficacious, even if they proved no better than the treatment given him by the army surgeon at Fort Kearney.

With the advent of the newcomers who had lodged at first in a Sibley tent, but had now taken up their abode in a sod house, there had come to young Doctor North a change quite as decided as that which had given him his gray hair.

Not that he saw much of the Texas drover and daughter; for in truth he rarely did see them, and then only enough to express a neighbourly interest. Yet with the addition of those two people to the meagre population of the frontier community a new phase of his inner life had declared itself.

Alice Arden could not but realize how constantly he yearned for his profession. The surrender of it, as she had the acumen clearly to understand, was the daily sackcloth and ashes worn by his fighting soul.

One afternoon, in the period of heavy frosts, he had busied himself in harvesting for Alice her winter's supply of turnips; and at dusk, when he entered the house, he brought with him a damp, woollen smell,

for a fine rain was falling. The children watched to see whether he would hang up his coat to dry, back of the woodstove which had recently been substituted for the fireplace. Should he dry his coat, it would mean that he intended to visit awhile before riding back to his homestead.

Quite as they had hoped, he did indeed take off his coat which soon began to steam a little as it hung a-drying. Meanwhile, he put his hands up to the clouded window-glass, and his face between them, the better to look out into the deepening darkness. How many times, in precisely the same way, he had been seen to do this peering forth, as with a restless impulse to plunge away and lose himself in the black drench of gloom!

Always at such moments a mood of glumness seemed to invade the house; and to-night the loud ticking of the clock mingled its tediousness with the drip and dribble from the eaves. In times like this the children yearned for a good jolly feeling to come back. They wanted jokes, liveliness, a story of brave adventure.

"*You* ask him," Connie whispered. "Maybe he'll tell us again about the smart trick the prairie dogs played on the rattlesnake."

This chanced to be a favourite tale with the smaller child, and he must always have his favourites.

"Have I told you," Harry North inquired, after he had been drawn away, a child clinging to either hand, to the armchair by the table, "have I told you about the mountain sheep whose horns get so big that he has to grind them off by rubbing them against a rock?"

He raised his palm to shade his eyes from the candlelight, and the shadow of his hand fell aslant across his face, like a black wing. Connie climbed to his knees, while Arthur leaned against the table, the "cow-lick" at the boyish crown slanting attentively forward.

Doctor North had cleared his voice, ready to begin the tale, when everybody gave a start of surprise. Someone had knocked. A hurried hand, assertive and loud, rapped a second time, and a third.

Alice opened the door, the candle-flame wagged in the draught, and a man came in, a man looking very corpulent in his buffalo overcoat, brown and shaggy. During the pause of expectation, after he had entered, a swishing grit as of coarse sand fell against the window. Sleet—the rain had turned into sleet. Even when the stranger spoke you could still hear the prickle and rasp of the storm against the house.

"The doctor?" he began. "At the drug store, they told me at the drug store—— And is he here?"

With the black shadow across his face Harry North held still. An alert tenseness had come to him, as if at any moment he might leap from the chair and get away. Not so much as a glance did he give to the visitor; but Alice looked and looked at the man, quite as though there might be something altogether remarkable in the grains of ice melting and glistening on his wolf-skin cap and in the hairy brown tufts of his capacious coat.

"The doctor," he repeated, "must come with me. Need him. I need him mighty bad."

Silence followed this announcement, an interval of embarrassed waiting. Harry North did not move.

Little Connie got promptly to the floor, because he could not stand the strangeness of the man holding him.

A curious hush had taken hold of the house. Alice, it seemed, could scarcely summon breath enough to tell the visitor what she felt compelled to say—to tell him, slowly and reluctantly, that he had come to the wrong place.

"Doctor Rogers," she directed, "three doors east of the blacksmith shop."

"Gone on a sick call," the man impatiently announced. "No telling when he'll be back." He swallowed, he moved his spur-jangling feet, he beat a fur glove against his palm. "I *can't* wait," he declared. "Won't *do* to wait. A baby, you understand. Our first baby. It will be our first. Mustn't wait—can't—won't do."

Doctor North had inclined forward, with his head between his palms.

"Come, now," the man importunately demanded. "Come along. If you're the doctor."

Still the physician did not move. He was staring at the floor between his feet.

"Look here," the stranger gruffly and petulantly cried out, "if it's a question of pay——" He exhibited a fat pouch; he declared emphatically: "Damn it, no charity case. Here—this—all, take it all, the whole of it!"

Still Harry North did not move. Alice alone was moving. From a wall-peg she had energetically snatched down her cloak.

"For the love of Christ!" the young fellow implored. Then he stamped, he angrily muttered, he

gripped a shoulder of the silent man. "Come. Get on your legs. Our first, you understand. Won't you come?"

The stony unresponsiveness of the man in the chair, the frozen immobility of that bent figure so exasperated the urgent visitor that he flung open his overcoat, and plunged a hand to his hip. But without closing upon the ivory butt of the six-shooter in its worn and shiny holster, the hand laxly fell. He saw that Alice had opened the door of a lantern to light the candle in it. Then came a humble kind of muttering:

"He *is*, though—he is a doctor. I know it. They were telling below—Kane said so, and a young lady —I arranged, of course, with Doctor Rogers. Only the time, you understand, has come quicker than we thought."

Spurts of light through the perforated top of the lantern freckled the girl's hand with luminous specks of yellow.

"Such a young thing to suffer so much!" the man went on. "Eighteen last July. Only eighteen." He babbled of bad luck. It was very unfortunate. "Things happen so," he said, "as if on purpose. Doc Rogers to be away at such a time!"

"Where," Alice inquired, "is your homestead?"

"You mean he'll come, then? Eh, will he?"

"Tell me the place," she insisted.

"The place? Why, you swing off to the left, where the trail branches at Spring Hollow. You go straight on till you come to Twin Cottonwoods. Can't miss the house. It's the only one in sight when you come to Twin Cottonwoods."

Doctor North took up a table-fork, looked at it, and put it down. He did not seem to realize that a stranger had come for him; that Alice had been talking with someone; that the man was waiting.

Meanwhile she had drawn the cloth hood over her head. She added, as she hastened toward the door with the lantern in her hand:

"Just wait till I cinch a saddle on. One of us, Doctor North or I, will go with you."

"Why wait?" he asked, impatiently shuffling and making his spurs jingle. "No, I better hurry back, hadn't I? You know the place. Twin Cottonwoods. Everybody knows Twin Cottonwoods. It's better, I guess, for me to go ahead. Yes. Get everything ready."

"Very well; ride, then," she agreed. "Heat plenty of water. Keep up a hot fire."

She went out, followed by the man, and the crunching of sleet on the doorstep sounded with a gritty loudness.

Awhile later, when she returned, her hood and shoulders were fluffed over with downy white, for once more the weather had changed. Snow, in great wet, adhesive flakes, had come trembling and balancing everywhere through all the spaces of the night.

With swift steps Alice went up to Harry North, and laying her hands on his shoulders, she peered searchingly into his eyes.

"One of us must attend that young mother. Shall I do it?" she asked. Something firm and compelling sounded in her tone. "Shall I?" she demanded, "or will you?"

CHAPTER IV

If!

IN THE night's pale darkness the frontier village lay dumb and sheeted up. Nowhere any neighbourly sound, not so much as a dog barking.

Storm would scarcely be the word for this fall of snow. It was a flowing animation, hushed and moist. One delicately felt the flakes—the phantom haste of them; and their eddying, continuous and light, touched the gentler senses as a perception rather than a sound. It was not cold. Eaves-drippings gave token that the snow had been melting a little as it fell, but it kept on falling; the air quivered with it, and lighted windows of the settlement no longer shone, but glowed in blotted saffron spots and halos.

As for Doctor North, once he had swung himself into the saddle, he briskly started away. But on such a night as this, how is it possible to speed as fast as the exigency might demand? His horse had begun to stumble; for the wet snow, collecting and balling under shod hoofs, prevented a sure footing, so that it became necessary, now and again, for the rider to dismount and knock off the hard-packed and rounded lumps.

The journey lengthened. Scattered village lights, one after another, kept dropping from view. Now

and again North turned in the saddle to see whether any pin-point of yellow might still fleck the window of the cabin he had left. Sometimes, as his vision groped for that aureate stab of radiance, an impression came to him of vague forms, two animal-shapes, ambiguously moving in the storm obscurity, one farther distant than the other.

He rode on. The clouded warmth of a settler's window seemed not so much to rise as to float into view and swim past. Familiar hills, likewise, were being left behind. Many had lost themselves in the hurrying hush of the storm which as yet had abated not a jot its infinitude of ghostly whisperings.

For distances beyond reckoning the rider could feel how the prairie was being deeply swathed. What a wonderful fall of snow! All the frosty spaces of sky and air were still spending prodigally of their delicate flakiness as though from an inexhaustible store.

North told himself: "It's colder, much colder; but drier, too. I shall reach Twin Cottonwoods if only the wind doesn't blow."

Aye, the wind! There was the thing to dread. If the hills should be shorn of their delicate fleeces; if they should be stripped naked by one of those ghastly blizzards of the plains whose prodigious seething wipes out the trail and every landmark! North knew the treachery of such a storm; calamitous smothers of snow and wind, breath-crushing blurs, a blind fury amazing in amplitude—strangling—overwhelming!

It might be better, he mused—infinitely safer—if the man who summoned him had been kept for com-

panion and guide. Someone endowed with the Indian's instinct for direction, someone able to travel this trail with sureness, even through the bafflement of cannonading winds, would at least give comradely assurance to a person having far to go on such a night as this.

Gazing back over the route he had come, it again seemed to North that an impalpable stain, darkly uncertain, was continuously clouding forward through the falling snow. Formerly there had been two of those dim shapes, but now only one.

What could it be? A horseman? If so, how very lucky! He shouted. He set up a loud hallooing to ascertain the truth of his speculation. And it pleased yet surprised him that the replying voice should not be far off, but near, incredibly near, and gayly cheerful.

Someone was calling:

"Here I am—here I am!"

Amazing thing! North could scarce believe what he heard. "Alice!" he gasped.

She laughed with gleeful exhilaration. "We better keep moving," she said. "No time to waste."

Pride sounded in his voice as he exclaimed:

"What a frontierswoman you've come to be!"

"I thought," she observed, as she drew nearer, "that I saw someone else on the trail."

"So did I," he answered.

Yet with such icy perils threatening, he knew Alice must not go on with him. "Awfully jolly to have you see me well on my way. But you've come far enough. You must go back now."

"Go?—where?"

"Back."

"Must I, though?"

"You must, dear."

"No."

"But indeed, indeed you must."

Like little Connie who changes the subject when being corrected for his misdeeds, Alice said irrelevantly:

"I borrowed this black horse from the Harrises. Nigger is his name. They call him Nig."

The front of her scarf, already white with her frozen breath, seemed ever to widen the pale zone of its crispness.

"What an idea, coming off like this," he said. "And it won't do, Alice. Not the thing to leave the children alone. What *can* you be thinking about?"

"But, of course, Hal, they're not alone. Mrs. Harris is staying with them."

While their aunt kept on, as before, definitely refusing to be sent back; the young man suddenly drew his horse over close to hers, and timorously putting forth an ungloved hand, he gently touched her cheek.

"Your work is done," she heard him telling her very earnestly. "The best you can hope to do. The rest . . . my affair. So now it is to be good-night."

"No!" With this final refusal went a shake of her body so decided that a blur of snow fell tumbling from her hood and shoulders.

"Very well." A tone of crisp command, even a trifle bullying, had come into his voice. "Go, then, if you like. But you will be going alone."

He had halted. When next he spoke it seemed to Alice that she had never before heard him speak with an inflection so gentle, yet mandatory and deep with emotional warmth.

"Not a step farther, not a jot do I move from here, until I see you safely on your way toward home."

"Don't send me back," she pleaded. "I must stay with you. Must, Hal. Your patient will want me. I'm qualified to help. Once, when Doctor Malcolm could get no one else, I helped him. Didn't do so badly. I'm sure he has told you that."

North had turned his horse. He sat motionless in the saddle, sternly and inflexibly waiting for her to leave.

Here, meanwhile, amid all this white bigness of the prairie, amid the vastness, the hush, and the unutterable foreboding, how paltry and pitiably little seemed these people, these two human atoms.

One of the atoms began naïvely coaxing like a child: "Let me stay; let me go with you. Please do! I won't be a nuisance."

The man had to laugh, hearing her say that. Dear nonsense, he thought it. And having laughed, he said to her with a gentleness more to be obeyed than any sovereign command:

"The children have only you. They need their aunt."

But she answered:

"To-night they need me less than that girl, that birth-giver. And what have I come for?—tell me that!—if it isn't that I am needed."

One could not argue with Alice Arden. Doctor North could only repeat:

"You are delaying me. You must go back."

"Well, if I must. . . . But how stubborn you are! What an obstinate, what a dear, foolish, precious, horrid old thing you are!"

Kissing her hands to him, she turned and rode away. Through the falling snow he heard her calling back:

"Good-night, dear boy! Good luck!"

So they parted. And being parted, he wished her back again. For it would be a long way—a long, lonely way for him, this grim trail to Cottonwoods.

But, as he went, a desire to laugh came to him. Not in years had he felt so acutely alive, so capable, so buoyantly full of energy.

Some miles farther he had travelled when, with jerky abruptness, the horse stopped short. He stopped, quivered, backed, went whirling frantically about. Had the animal been poisoned with loco weed he could not have behaved in a manner more crazily obstinate. He braced himself, he refused to proceed; neither quirt nor spur could urge him on.

North, all the same, could see nothing sinister hereabouts. Rubbing the ice-beads from his lashes, he took sharp account of his environment. And throughout the dancing flow and hesitating quiver of flakes still endlessly falling he espied many white mounds. Strange he did not recognize them! To right and left, and in front of him, they were scattered all about. Nearly of the same size, shaped all alike, these snow heaps resembled a waste of boulders neatly shrouded with white foam.

What could they be? He turned in the saddle, he carefully examined them, he strove anxiously to

make out any familiar shape amid those bulging fleeces. Might it be possible, he wondered, that he had strayed off the trail, even though he had been extremely confident, until now, of his direction?

All at once some of the white mounds began to heave cumbrously and grow animate. Astounding miracle! Behold many graves opening, many tombstones rising, as if the last trumpet might have sounded! Only these sheeted graves rose like cows, massive, humped, dark underneath, with backs all fluffed over as with loose cotton. They got up rapidly, surprised snorts and steamy breaths rising with them, and they went floundering into motion, shouldering their way against the storm, instead of drifting with it as domestic cattle do.

"So!" North exclaimed. "Snug bedding ground for them." He had heard, often enough, of how weather-wise are the buffalo of the plains, and that once "sensing a big shove of blizzard," they will promptly get ready for it by moving along into arroyos and sheltered places.

Encouragingly the rider said to his horse:

"That's it. Pound along, old boy. Get somewhere."

He passed oval spaces on the ground, the spaces vacated by the slowly galloping beasts, and these dark patches of earth, denting the smooth surface of the snow, gave the illusion of deep holes. They looked ominous enough; everything looked so. But no matter. Let there be difficulties! He felt warm, and joyous, and foolishly invincible. He was not a mere doctor answering a professional call; he was a knight entering the lists against the dreadfulest

of adversaries, to do battle with the great north wind.

Hands and feet tingled. Frost burned the lips of Doctor North. In his throat, and deep down into his lungs, he felt a scalding as from acid fumes. Cold, cold, the puckering and metallic taste of bitter, biting cold!

"If," North said to himself, "if only, for a little while longer, the wind doesn't begin to blow!"

If! What a syllable it is, that *if*. The white-fleeced hills, the sheeted prairie, the benumbing frost, all the multiplying pangs of a ghastly suspense were nothing else than a colossal and appalling If. Everywhere hopeless insecurity, aching silence, a still ferocity of cold. No wind, no breath of wind. The night lying in an icy swoon, stunned, amazing in loveliness, ghastly in the virginal reach of mighty solitudes. And it was not a dead witchery. It was waiting.

The horse seemed to know what it awaited. He ran, he fled away, he steamed all over in a prodigious effort to outrace the coming of the great north wind.

CHAPTER V

The Monster

SNOW, and a bursting sibilance. Window-panes all blind with frost. Everywhere curious pouncings and fumblings.

Arthur frightens his little brother with the grotesque fancy that some drunken giant has come floundering against the house. The monster is still there. Don't you hear him? All that panting, and heaving, and wheezing! If he keeps on shoving like that, he will surely push the cabin over. But he can't get in. He is too big to get in. Yet hear how the great ruffian keeps right on shuffling at the door!

Night long and all day long this log-built home of theirs has quaked to the pressure of the wind; and ceaselessly the immense hissing continues, as from enormous steam pipes shattered.

Using a knife-blade, scraping and rubbing, Alice has opened a peep-hole in the crystalled fernery and jagged encrustations of the window. But what is to be seen out yonder? The frost of the pane is only a deeper gray than the gray of the blizzard's unabated blurrings.

To conserve the fuel supply has not been easy. For the check-draught, what with such mighty winds a-blowing, grows rather ineffectual. No matter that the stove may be tightly shut up, it pants con-

tinuously; it pants and roars as if every coal of fire were going to be sucked away. Heat flies also; there is no fervour in the flames avidly gushing. In the pole frame work of the bunks each nail-head at the joints has put on a rounded cap of frost.

By calking with rags the wheezing places about the windows, Florence has been of much assistance to her aunt; but still new places, unsuspected crannies, keep on declaring themselves, and through these flaws white serpent tongues of snow come licking in. The buffalo robe, on the upper bed, is all gray with unmelted siftings.

More than once Alice has said: "It's not so bad now. I'll try again."

She wants to go to the barn. She is thinking of the mules that ought to be fed, and especially of the cow that ought to be milked. In cloak, hood, shawl, and knitted scarf, with a tin pail on her arm, she is prepared to make the plunge; but let her open the door to go out, and the great wallowing of snow instantly shoves her back. Then, with Florence helping, there comes a great tussle with the door, to get it shut again.

On the peg Alice hangs up the pail and harkens as if it might be possible to hear the lowing of the cow. "Poor thing!" she sighs, and though she may pity, she durst not try to relieve the animal's suffering.

From the bed, where the two boys have cuddled together, in an effort to get warm, Arthur observes:

"This must be a storm like the one Seth Martin tells about. Some antelopes were driven right against the fence of his corral. He found them there, frozen stiff."

"Don't!" Aunt Alice exclaims. She cannot bear such talk. Florence, however, would like to know more about the frozen antelopes; but she observes, disdainfully, while rubbing her hands together above the stove:

"Seth Martin tells big yarns. Was only stuffing you, most likely."

"No, he wasn't. Some men were talking. They were telling about great storms out on the plains. One man—a soldier he was, who went with the dragoons against the Mormons—he told about mules, army mules, all squeezed together. And it was sad to hear them; they groaned so, and cried, on account of the cold, and the snow blowing over them! Two of them, next morning. . . ."

"Do talk of something else," Alice interrupts, and then speaks to Florence, saying over again what she has previously said:

"In four hours, even if the going was bad, he could surely ride to Twin Cottonwoods. Yes, even three hours—plenty of time. I am glad the wind held off so long. No need to worry. Foolish to worry."

Many hours the storm has continued; but with the falling of this, the second night, the wind also falls, and now a frozen hush grips the house. All the wooden joints go on contracting with the still intensity of cold. Brief, weird, ever unexpected, a frosty snap now and again startles the silence. These abrupt little noises are the haunting ghosts of violence left here by the long bombardment of mighty winds.

CHAPTER VI

The Third Rider—Winifred?

DURING the period of early candlelight Victor North came wading to the house, for the purpose of bringing in firewood and helping with the chores. The knitted scarf drawn up over the lower part of his face lay like a silver patch, so white it was and stiff from the frost of his breath. He talked calmly, showing Alice that he had not grown in the least alarmed over the absence of his brother.

Good the wind had gone down. What a blow it had been! Drifts even ten and fifteen feet high. The mild and open weather, Victor said, had started the sap in the trees, and now several of them, down by the river, had burst with the frost, splitting wide open. A snapped twig fell on the telegraph wire, making it ring like a tuning fork, so keenly cold was the air.

Shivering a little, despite his nearness to the stove, Victor presently added:

"As I was coming down to the river, I thought I saw someone, a woman, crossing on the ice. And sure enough, it *was* a woman. She knew me before I recognized her. Winnie Barton. Asked at once about my brother. Wanted to know whether Hal had got back."

Alice inquired: "Is her father worse?"

"She didn't say. Appeared serious. None of her customary nonsense and jocularities. I was to tell Hal, when he got back from Twin Cottonwoods, that her father would like to see him. I asked if he seemed to be failing, and she said, 'Not especially.' Her voice sounded tired."

How had she learned, Alice wondered, that Hal had gone off on a sick call?

Kane, it appeared, had been filling a new prescription for her father, and it was while she was waiting that the man came there. He didn't drop in, but (as she put it) he "plumped in, looking sorrier than a singed cat." The phrasings and odd expressions of Winifred Barton were always being quoted by both of the North brothers. "Rather droll," Victor went on, "to hear her tell about him. Said he was *scairt;* that was her word. 'Scairt, and miserable, and happy. A perfect dear! And mad, too.' I had better believe it. 'Mad enough to shoot up the place. Acted as if it was all the druggist's fault that he couldn't get hold of Doc Rogers.' Wanted Kane to go with him, wanted *her* to go, wanted (so she declared) 'to turn the whole settlement upside down.'"

"Yes, and she would have gone, too," Alice generously conceded. "I don't doubt that—if there had been no one else to go."

Yet it was less of this than of something else that the children's aunt was thinking. She, too, had imagined a third rider, last night, on the trail of Cottonwoods. Who was it? Could that have been Winnie Barton? What if she had foreseen the com-

ing of the stupendous storm and had realized that Harry North was faring forth against blood-numbing forces of frost and snow and wind?

As the result of this inquisitorial musing it is not to be supposed that Alice Arden would be pleased with the part she had played. "If I hadn't been there," she was telling herself, "that stop-at-nothing creature would have gone on with him. He could not have sent *her* back. She would have seen him through."

Last night, had the third rider been identified as Winifred Barton, her presence might have been bitterly resented; but a mood of torturing suspense leaves no room for jealous considerations. Whatever may have been going on in Alice Arden, she continued to chat with Victor North, uttering small talk fluently, scarcely betraying even the faintest note of anxiety. As he left the house he could only suppose that Alice was not allowing herself to be unduly worried. Nor could he guess that all through the night, whenever a house-beam snapped, she would rouse up, hopefully expecting that this time, surely, it would be Doctor North knocking at the door.

For, of course, he would have the thoughtfulness to come. He would come straight here to tell her how the case was faring, and to let her know that all had gone well with him.

What a dreary period it had come to be, this endless season of waiting! Eventually, however, the tarnished silver of the encrusted windows shifted to a violet tone and then to blue; for now the sluggard day had fairly begun its imperceptible brightening over a world more deeply swathed than ever with new depths of snow freshly fallen.

Up the young woman rose at once. Morning at last! She must have breakfast ready for Doctor North when he came. Only it grew more and more difficult for her to keep from standing at the window, idle, motionless, for ever gazing out yonder into that august emptiness, that stainless majesty of white.

One of the children, little Connie, roused himself drowsily, and seeing his aunt darkly outlined against the frosted window, he sleepily inquired:

"Do you see him? Is he coming?"

Silent as before, Alice went on looking through the cleared space of the window, and as she gazed she grew aware that the sun was rising. All the pillowed snow, gouged, scooped, heaped illimitably into mounds, had now begun to take on a warmth of colouring. It flushed like living flesh, but marble is not more lifeless, nor ice more cold, than the pinky sheen and sparkle of that dead wilderness.

"I don't," she finally answered, "I don't see him."

CHAPTER VII

Thanksgiving

SOMEONE knocked. The rapping came at a period when Alice had abandoned the window, to rest her eyes, if not her heart, from the ache of the snow's vast bedazzlement. How benumbing a torpor had come to her from the long term of high-keyed anxiety could not better be attested than by this, that at first she did not hear the impatient knuckle-blows of an assertive hand. But when the whole cabin resounded like a drum with the *whack-whack-whack* of booted feet kicking off the snow, she sped instantly to the door and flung it wide.

Only to be disappointed. "Oh!" she said, her hands going up to her temples and pressing hard as if to still the throbbing.

"Come," she articulated. "Come in. Never mind the snow." Then she gripped the door-post, holding herself steady. "I know you. From Cottonwoods. Well?"

"Bad storm," the man asserted.

"Say it!" she demanded. "Lost? You haven't found him? Well, if it's that. . . . So, so! You smile. Come in, warm yourself. Hot coffee. . . . Talk, why don't you? To stand, and not talk. . . . Wood, Florence; cram wood into the fire. He's half frozen."

Gruffly chuckling as he moved, the man clumsily entered. Big and shaggy in wolf-skin cap and buffalo overcoat, he suggested something grotesquely jolly, like a dancing bear. In time to his hopping, boyish stride, all the dishes in the cupboard clinked and clattered.

"Floundered through!" Alice exclaimed. "It must be so. But can't you speak? Well, sir, what about it?"

"He did; he got there."

"What then? In time? Is it all right?"

"All right, yes. It's a boy."

"And Doctor North? Still there? . . . Quick, Flo: cup and saucer, coffee, thick cream.—Still there, you say?"

"Still there; yes, mom. Doc is still there. It's a boy."

The brown and hairy flaps of the man's high coat collar had paled with collected frost; the moustache and whiskers about his mouth were icily beaded. After his furry mittens had gone flapping down on the floor, he began to pick at the frozen fringe about his lips, and whenever seedy crystals fell on the hot stove, they skipped and crazily hopped, with a hiss and a sputter, and a quick vanishment into tiny whiffs of steam.

"Tell us, please," Aunt Alice went on, "tell us why he stays. Why didn't he come back with you?"

Her voice sounded complacent and satisfied, as if she were one who would never, by any manner of means, be so foolish as to worry. "Reached you in time," she repeated. "You said so." All her hot impatience, it would seem, had chilled to dis-

ciplined restraint. She could wait. Let him take his time. Now, at least, she would know how to wait until he told everything.

"Pretty crimpy," he announced. "It sure *is* cold. You bet!"

But it was not of the weather nor of Doctor North that the visitor was thinking. He felt good, he smiled. Something proud, gentle, and foolish-fond was looking out of his blue eyes; and one could not tell whether the moisture on his eyelashes had been caused by melted ice or by happy tears.

"You know how it is," he was saying. "They are such little bits of things." Looking at Connie, he broadly smiled. "I guess *he* was like that, too, when he was born—*awful* little. Not pretty, neither —not a bit pretty. And yet, somehow . . . I don't know . . . they make a man feel so new and different! Seems like a man wants to—he wants to be kind, wants to sing, or cry, or laugh. A boy, you understand. And he breathes good, he is all right. The world is all made over. That's how it is."

Alice swallowed hard as she asked yet again:

"The doctor? Is he all right?"

But the miracle of birth, the marvel of it, the ecstasy of fatherhood, is something which cannot take heed of such mere nonsense as a girl's anxiety. The man had caught up the smaller of the two little boys. Connie felt himself firmly held; he felt his hair stroked with amazing gentleness for a hand so big, and rude, and rough. And he heard a strong voice saying:

"Hey, little fella, do you know what? I'd like to kiss you. But no, I won't, because—you wouldn't

like that. I'm too much of a stranger. I'm too ice-cold. First I have to—— How solid you are!—I have to get thawed out. Solid, yes—just as if you were made of iron. Healthy, strong! Yes, and he, too, my own son, he is going to be like this. It's a boy."

Taking hold of the man's arm, Alice Arden gripped him with an earnestness and a power that made him wince.

"Is Doctor North all right?"

"Yes, he—— that is——" But still the man could not bring himself to think or talk of anything but the strutting glory that had come to him. He gently pinched the rosy ears and the rosy cheeks of the little boy; he requested with a hearty voice which smote with a ringing vibration against the big round of the dishpan on the wall: "Uncle! call me Uncle, will you? Luther is my name. You will call me Uncle Lute. Then, maybe, I will bring you a lamb, a little baby lamb, that you can have for a pet. How's that? Do you want a lamb?"

Abruptly Alice took the child away from the man. "Tell us about the doctor," she insisted. "Will you?"

"I will. Only, first off, I better *do* something. Give me the axe. Where's the shovel? Clear a path to the stable, cut wood, do the chores. Afterward talk, tell everything."

"No," she commanded, "let it be now. Tell me now."

"It's all right," he assured her. "Don't you get scared and fidget. Some frost bites, of course. His feet, they'll swell on him; they're going to be

awful sore. A pity, so it was, to cut off his boots; a shame! Such fine boots. Eighteen dollars he paid for them. But what else could I do? Simply *had* to come off. Pack his feet in snow—that was the thing. In bad shape. That's a fact. Pretty bad. All night long (it was six in the morning when the baby was born), all night long I had to work and grease and rub to get the frost out. Fingers on one hand nipped a little, not much, nothing so bad that he couldn't do his doctoring. 'It's a mercy,' says he, 'that she's young. Everything is going to be all right.' There, now, that's what he's like. Not thinking of himself. All frozen up, that-away, but thinking only about his patient. Whew, what a man!—— Give me the axe. Where's the shovel?"

"He reached you, then, before the big wind came on?"

"Before? Why, no, that's not it; not that way at all. He got plum off the trail, in the wind and the snow blowing. His gun, his six-shooter—lucky thing he had his six-shooter."

"You heard him shooting?"

"No, mom, we didn't hear. But something chipped the edge of a crock on a high shelf. Grit fell down on my hand. Milk pans jangled. Another bullet! Then I got a notion that I heard a voice strangulatin' in the storm. Yes. Seemed like somebody, right under the floor, miles deep, was blattin' like a sick sheep."

"And you risked searching for him!"

"Found him. When the storm got to gaspin' for breath I could sometimes hear him plain. Found him—yes. His horse was down. They was snug-

gled up tight, the best way they could, to keep each other warm, him and his horse. He didn't know, he said—couldn't quite make out whether the light in our windows was a sure-nuff light or not."

"To get him," Alice began, with an awed hush coming into her voice, "to get him you risked more than the storm. You risked being shot. He might not have seen you. He might have kept on shooting."

"No, he heard me. He answered; and then—— Excuse me. I better fetch in some wood. I stand and talk; I'm windy; I don't *do* anything. But, you understand, it's the first one. Our first baby. It's a boy."

He laughed, flung off his buffalo coat, seized the shovel and axe, but forgot to pick up his mittens. And when these furry coverings for the hands were given to him by Florence, he was still so exuberant that he held them and looked at them, and did not seem to know what in the world to do with them. But he did know how to work. In a whirlwind of energy, a veritable fury of friendly performances, he toiled, sang, and sometimes yelled like a prankish boy.

Eagerly the children watched him, opening peep-holes in the frost-ferns of the panes by melting the gray whorls and jagged leaves with their breath and with their warm palms.

Alice Arden did not look out. Motionless she stood—motionless, wide-eyed, with hands tightly clasped. It was even some time before she smiled with the solemn joy that had come to her.

Then, attracted by a voice quietly murmuring,

Florence turned to look; but could neither understand that lit glory of her aunt's face nor the words that were like a prayer of some sort, a thanksgiving incoherently fervent.

"Birth," Alice was saying. "New life. Aye, and a hard birth it has been. The valley of the shadow—— For love's sake, for humanity he has fought his fight—— Birth. Life. Good years coming. The Lord has not forgotten us. He has blessed us and kept us; the Lord has been merciful unto us!"

PART IV

DEATH

CHAPTER I

Wedding Guests

WINTER had passed, and spring; and now the month of brides was blossoming.

In these wonder days of June Alice Arden and Harry North jointly received a much-prized letter (one more urgently candid than ever before) from their fatherly friend, old Doctor Malcolm.

Thus it began:

Such good news to hear that Hal has at last really buckled to, as I have long been hoping he might! But what about the wedding?

What, indeed? No matter how devoutly Harry North may have desired to bring himself to plain speaking, how was he to overcome his diffidence? He durst not have the presumption to claim the felicity which his venerable friend had here so boldly named. "What about the wedding?" There it was, without prelude or apology, quite as though he were a man of unblemished probity, in every way fit to be mated with the woman whose fineness so humbled him that, being face to face with her, he was not one to speak of marriage. Now it was spoken for him. "Wedding" was the word, and boldly the old doctor's letter admonished:

I beg of you not to put it off. If only I were there I think I should bully you into it at once. I ought, perhaps, to be starting West right away; but, somehow, I do not feel quite up to it. Nothing, of course, is really wrong with me, except my usual bad temper. Your cousin Hattie, my dear Alice, makes of herself no end of a nuisance in trying to safeguard my health. As my housekeeper she grows more and more tyrannical every day. I do believe she has taken it into her head that age is beginning to tell on me. She is wrong, surely; and how I do hate being bossed by a woman!

But if she is in the least right about it, I can tell the two of you what it is that would give back to me my youth. It would be the news that the wedding chest had been opened, and that all the pretty things sleeping there had at last been worn. I remember, my dear, how delicious it was to have you show me some of them, and to watch you blush over those that I was not to see.

Well, they have been made this long while, all those dainty garments, and I know how very tired they are of always lying in that chest. They have had to wait long —too long. How can you, if you love me, have the heart to make them wait much longer?

Oh, boy and girl, you who have been as son and daughter to me, let me tell you this: when finally my time shall come, the grave, I am sure, will be less dark to me if only I may know that the two of you have crossed the threshold into the kind of married life which I myself found useful and good.

Now, Winifred Barton and her father, upon being invited to the wedding, understood, not ungratefully, the deference shown them. It was Alice herself who had bidden these special guests. She had done more than that. With the generosity of large natures she

had spoken her ungrudging thanks to the drover's daughter for her share in the service of restoring Doctor North to his profession.

"But he ought to laugh more," Winifred had strangely answered, afterward adding that the children were good for that. "Yes," she said, "they help, they make fun for him." A singular wistfulness had looked out of her dark eyes. One could fancy them to be saying: "Some day there will be children of his own. You, not I, will mother them. And they will make fun for him."

Often Alice used to wonder whether this could be the true meaning of the surrendering pathos of Winnie Barton's face. Obviously the girl had changed. She was more subdued than in the earlier days of her residence in the settlement, yet it well might be that the prolonged illness and hopelessness of her father's case had finally wrought this effect. Her fondness for the North brothers was nothing she had cared to conceal; but whether her partiality was more for the one man than for the other Alice could do no better than surmise.

As for Hugh Barton himself, he regarded the wedding invitation in the light of "a right friendly thing." He even declared, with unctuous joviality, that "if it's something to be done showy, I'll be the one to give the bride away. Of course," he went on, "it would be the place of your old friend, Cap Harris, to do that; but he won't hardly make the riffle, I reckon, being gone back East on business, with his wife along."

It was unlikely that either Mrs. Harris or her husband would return to Tecon City in time for the

wedding. Neither could Hugh Barton count on himself as one certain to attend the ceremony. He even said to Alice:

"I hardly think, my dear, that I can make it. Nice, though, to be asked. Weddings," he repeated, "I like them. Christenings, too."

He went on to say that the notions Bible people had rigged up in regard to heaven were "enough to gravel a body. No givings in marriage—pah! Now me, if I was ever to land in that kind of a better world, I tell you what I'd do: I'd emigrate. But I could stand it all right, maybe, if I could have Winnie along, with her guitar, so that she and her mother could sing together the foolish little Spanish songs that always get a body to feeling sorta mellow."

Something gentle had come into his voice. One understood that he really wanted to go to the wedding, in order that his youth might be revived in him, and all the fine, life-long memories. With fondling endearment he lifted the bride's hand, pressing it first to his cheek and then to his lips. But luck, he was afraid, would be against him. He couldn't get around much any more. Too bad. Awfully sorry it had to be so.

Winifred, on the contrary, thought that she at least would be able to go. If her father's condition permitted; if he did not have another of those backsets which could never be foreseen, she most surely would attend the marriage service. Yes, and serve as bridesmaid. Be glad to. She courageously announced that she would be glad.

Yet when the day and the hour actually came to leave for the minister's house, in company with Victor

"'A sweet woman,' she was murmuring. 'Beautiful. And kind.'"

North, she was not ready to go. He arrived promptly at the time appointed. Fashionably arrayed in maroon trousers, varnished boots, and a wide-skirted coat of blue broadcloth, he carried himself with a martial port, with walking stick suggesting that it might really be an arm of defence, a sabre drawn. There could indeed be no doubt that he had set out for battle, even though the combat were to be merely another of those quiet affairs which human beings, in the queer hurlyburly of life, must now and again fight out within their own souls.

As he approached, Winifred did not rise from the doorstep. Clad loosely in a garment of languid folds whose original hue, possibly a rich wine colour, had dulled in the course of many washings to warm tones of russet and faded rose, she seemed quite unconscious of her negligée. Bare feet she had thrust into Indian moccasins of soft leather which harmonized well with the half-buttoned wrapper but contrasted oddly with the foam-fall of laces adorning with fragile daintiness the lower part of a festal petticoat. With head resting against a door-post, the hands of the girl clasped a bended knee, and the flowing sleeves of the wrapper left ungarmented the sculptural grace of the arms, faultless in their curves and whitely gleaming in the sun. Brush and comb lay beside her, the luxuriant mass of hair spreading wide in black-blue fluffiness over her right shoulder and bosom.

The doorstep was not a shaded place. Winifred sat in the sun, for she was of those who do not hide their sorrow in a darkened room. Immobile in the broad, bright, naked light of day, she must have

realized in a bemused fashion, as in a dream, that she was no longer alone, and idly she plucked together the upper part of the unbuttoned wrapper.

Vaguely she knew who it was that had come; but she went on sitting there, very still, and very beautiful, quite as though a mesmeric spell might have been wrought upon her by the silence, by the warm air, the blue sky, and the clear June brilliancy of the day. Victor was to have no quirks from her, no playful nonsense, no humorous oddities of speech. "Making fun" she had been wont to call it; only her readiness for making fun was not for such a time as this. She seemed to be looking out yonder, distantly looking into the colourless films, the thin ripples of heat everywhere a-quiver over far field and dozing meadow.

Absently prodding the ground with his walking stick, the young man finally observed:

"It's almost time."

Winifred looked at him. Laces at her bosom rose and fell more rapidly, as if this frost-bound moodiness of hers had now, finally, been thawed.

Who was this man? Oh, yes—Victor! He had come for her. She was to go away with him to a wedding, to be bridesmaid, and he to serve as groomsman.

Winifred brought herself to smile. It seemed to him that he had never seen dark eyes so wonderfully bright as these now gazing at him in a kind of awed astonishment.

"Almost time," he had said. Time to go—he must mean that. She spoke of it as one who ponders something quite unusual:

"You, then—*you* are really going!"

In baffled perplexity she looked him over, from top to toe, and the hush of surprise was in her voice as she added: "Going?" But, of course, he would. Victor heard her telling him so.

"And," she said, "it's nice. It's like you. A good heart. I know you would never want to bring her any unhappiness."

Again Winifred fell silent. Again she gazed long into the far quiver of colourless heat; and when she spoke once more it almost seemed as if her words came from out yonder, out of that hush and loneliness and bright vacancy.

"A sweet woman," she was murmuring. "Beautiful. And kind. You do right, Victor, to love her, and be good to her."

"I?" he questioned, still prodding the ground with his stick. "What makes you say that? What in the world makes you think——?"

The gazer into space did not hear him. That immensity of emptiness, where impalpable heat-waves continued so tediously a-throb, seemed once more to have wrought upon her its spell of torpor and aching lassitude. But she spoke again, with a voice altogether firm and quiet:

"He will be her husband. It is not to be prevented. It's fate. And we must be content."

As if in ominous answer to what she said, brief rustlings huskily startled the silence of the cabin. A fitful sequence of those rustlings came from the dusky interior of the sod house. Were they, perhaps, the stir of someone moving about on a shuck mattress? Of someone sitting up and then remaining

very still, the better to listen to what was here being said?

"He, your father," Victor muttered, "not well enough, I suppose—I mean, he's not going, is he?"

"What?" she asked. She had heard, but her numbed faculties had a struggle to get at his meaning. Victor, she knew, had mentioned her father, and she held herself to the task of talking about him, of articulating words which she must have supposed to be in answer to the young man's question. "Taking a little nap. He has to. Likes to keep up, but—takes naps. Tires easily."

She did not turn her head to gaze into the darkened interior of the cabin which had been partitioned into two compartments by figured calico; but she went on speaking of her father, she mentioned trifles, she seemed to cling to this topic, or to any ordinary topic which might help a little to crowd out all thought of this day's notable event.

"Asleep," she again repeated, and stopped short, realizing at last how she must have been saying over, very stupidly, the same things.

Since her dull state had prevented her from hearing the stir of the husk mattress, she might well suppose her father to be sound asleep. But it was not so. Never in all his life had Hugh Barton been more acutely, more strangely and purposefully, wide awake.

CHAPTER II

Ministerial Delay

SINCE pioneer etiquette gives sanction to the entering of a house, even though no one may be there to give you welcome, the bridal company did not long keep itself waiting on the clergyman's doorstep.

It could only be regarded as a circumstance a little embarrassing that the wife of the Rev. John Waterson should be in Omaha, to attend a district meeting of the Women's Aid Society. As for her husband (a man who even neglected his meals, now that there was no one at home to remind him of them) is it properly to be said of him that he had forgotten his hymeneal appointment?

No, not at all. He had not forgotten. But when one is labouring for the Lord, not merely in a priestly and spiritual sense, but literally, among chips and shavings and sawdust, with nails in his mouth and a song of praise in his soul, he may, of course, be one of those ecstatic workmen who simply take no account of how treacherously the minutes have been slipping by.

So, in his temporary absence, the bride and groom and guests accommodated themselves to the situation by tenanting the rectory.

The regrets of the Bartons had been conveyed by

Victor. Winifred was sorry. The smooth-shaven face of the young man assumed rather a wooden inflexibility as he said so.

"Her father—not so well—failing. Thought she had better stay with him. Had started to dress, and then—— She's awfully sorry."

Victor himself, with a mien abnormally sedate, appeared something less than overjoyed. All the way along to the minister's house he had preserved a solemn, let-me-get-through-with-this determination; but an inner restlessness now betrayed itself by the avidity with which he welcomed the self-proposed errand of going to investigate the cause of the clergyman's delay. Once out of doors, this emissary walked with a stride stiffly martial, going down the slope along a footpath sharply dipping toward the little building, the newly erected church whence issued the tap-tap-tap of the hammer.

The ecclesiastical carpenter listened politely to what was desired of him, and with iron stems bristling between his lips, mumbled "Quite so—quite so." One by one, however, these remaining nails had all to be driven home before he would put his hammer down.

These pews should have, he thought, some applied ornamentation. Black walnut, perhaps; but it would have to be simple. He was not, unfortunately, a cabinet maker. Far from it. Handy with tools, though; always had been. How about the backs? Did Mr. North regard the slope of the pew-backs as about right?

In the house the waiting continued. Florence looked grave; her little brothers felt subdued; Arthur

began to fidget, twiddling on the window-sill with his fingers. Once, swallowing hard, he plucked up spirit to announce:

"Immigrant wagons, see! All strung out along the road. Waiting for the ferry, I shouldn't wonder."

There can be nothing harder on a boy than to wait and wait, with everything at a standstill.

By and by he whispered to his sister: "If they don't get something started pretty soon, I'm going to bolt."

Florence made big eyes at him, to show how shocked she was.

"Hush!" she enjoined. "Don't talk." She even tilted her chin to look more primly decorous than ever. One could see that every minute of the time she was conscious of her poke bonnet with its trimming of blue ribbon, and also conscious of her white-silk mitts. No matter that they made her little sun-burned hands look browner than common, she was holding a lace-edged handkerchief with a most lady-like air.

"Not talk?" said Arthur, leaning against her chair. "Why?"

"Well, you mustn't. It's not right. It's a wedding."

In dejected boredom he now looked at some wax flowers, under glass, a dreary wreath of them inside a frame of black walnut.

"What's it for?" he whispered.

"To look nice; to—the same as a picture—to look nice."

"Aw, I don't mean that thing! I mean, what's a wedding for? I can't see that they're good for much.

Don't amount to shucks. But you've gone on and gone on about this one, till I s'posed it was going to *be* something."

"Just you wait. You'll see. And don't lean so! You're mussing my skirt—— After awhile, when the minister gets here, they will stand up, Dockey North and Aunt Alice will. And the service will begin. There will be reading out of a prayer-book. We will all stand up. And——"

"And what?"

"There will be a ring. Dockey will put the ring on her finger."

"And *then* what?"

"I don't know. I think that's about all."

"Thunder!" Arthur muttered. "I'd ruther go swimming, any day, than have a wedding!"

Connie, however, was not so out of sorts about it; for as yet nobody had ordered him to come away from the what-not. He looked curiously at the things on the shelves of that slight little stand in the corner: bits of petrified wood, a dry starfish, some specimens of quartz from Pike's Peak, a little bear carved out of wood, and some big shells in which you could hear a roaring if you held them to your ear. Each instant the child had been expecting somebody to say: "Don't touch." All the while that he entertained himself with the what-not exhibition, he felt guilty about it; he would have sworn that it was a wrongdoing of some sort. This feeling is what made it so much of an adventure. He handled everything, he did it stealthily, all the while looking about to see when somebody was going to stop him.

The older nephew might have remained uncheerful;

yet the look in the face of his Aunt Alice and the smiling in her eyes were enough, somehow, to give him a good feeling in spite of himself. Oh, yes! and there was the wedding cake to be considered. Even a boy can be fairly patient if there is a wedding cake, a big one, glorious with white icing, a veritable triumph.

The face of the bridegroom had also brightened as he went on looking at Alice. For how delicious the bloom of her cheeks, the radiant pleasure of her face, the kindly and deep glow of her heart's rejoicing!

Would she contrive, somehow, to keep little or much of this happiness through the years to come? Would he, perhaps, find a way to defend it and *let* her keep it?—he, who had brought so much of sorrow into her life! He felt very humble. He trembled lest this great felicity of hers should wither away. Nor could he help asking himself whether it was fair to her, this wedding. Was it fair, when there were so many better men? Victor, for instance!

Thinking of this, Doctor North turned to the window, and stood looking out. And while he thus remained, in that old mood of self-questioning, he saw two men emerging from the new church, that pine structure, wholly windowless, unpainted, and still in its raw state of weather-boarding. The clergyman and Victor were coming.

In the road a third person—doubtless a belated wedding guest—had also appeared, and was beginning, with laborious effort, to ascend the hill toward the minister's house.

CHAPTER III

Grim Gallantry

BY ATTENTIVE hearkening to what Victor North and Winnie had said to each other, her father had not missed the chief point. She would not serve as bridesmaid; she refused to attend the marriage service.

Not going, eh? Could it be possible? After all the fuss, and sewing, and getting her flummery things ready for the wedding, then to turn right around, at the last moment, and decide not to go! *Por Dios!* where was her pride?

Hugh Barton stirred on the husk mattress. He thought: "I'll get up. I'll have it out with Winnie. She'll go to that wedding."

Even while Victor North was talking with her, the girl's father had been minded to give Winifred the berating he thought she deserved. But later would do. By and by he would see whether a daughter of his should so lack pluck!

Yet having hobbled angrily to the door, and looked at her, his disgust turned suddenly into a fatherly impulse to get his arms around her, and comfort her, and let her cry as hard as ever she wanted to cry, with her face against his shoulder, as sometimes used to happen, years ago, when she was only a little girl.

Here she sat, as when Victor North had left; here, motionless in the sun, her head still leaning back against the door-post, and hands laxly a-droop in the fragile laces of her lap.

One glimpse of her was enough. Hugh Barton knew she was not to be a bridesmaid, that she was not to be got to the wedding.

What then? Why, then, he himself must go. He must let them see—the dear boy and his bride—that Hugh Barton wished them well. He really did. Despite the heartbreak which the wedding had brought to the one he loved best in all the world, these were people to deserve well wishing. And must have it!

But how get away from here? Winnie would stop him. She had grown to be such a tyrant in watching over him, his poor dear Winnie!

He began moving about, making sundry thumping noises as when a man draws on his boots. Then, having craftily emptied out his medicine bottle, he inveighed against the smallness of the bottle. Devil take the thing, always getting empty!

"But, Winnie," he said, "you're not dressed for going to the drug shop." Well, never mind, then; never mind. *He* would go. The cut-off billiard cue, used for a walking stick, went tapping about very smartly.

By and by he came hobbling from the house, and with the staff helping him, cautiously eased himself down from the doorstep.

Winifred must surely have noticed a tell-tale oddness in his manner if her dark eyes had not been so empty of vision. She looked at nothing, saw nothing,

not even the vast indifference of fields and hills and the lonely, light-drenched distance.

The strangest thing about her father was that he had cloaked himself with a bright-hued Mexican serape, precisely as though he might be going into winter weather instead of passing out here into the clear brightness, the scented warmth of mellow earth, and fresh meadows, and wild June roses blossoming. He contrived to get quite past his daughter before she brought herself to make listless inquiry:

"Where you going, dear?"

"Drug store," he mumbled with a shiver, as if an iciness had got into his blood. It may have been that he felt cold, or it may only have been through habit that he had wrapped himself with this capacious shawl. "Exercise," he added. "Be right back."

She should have observed his face. Why that flushed hue, purplish and excessive?

"You mustn't," she mildly interdicted, but did not rouse herself to further protest. Yet was it well, all this eager exertion of his? Why go pushing and prodding along like that?—so very fast, with his crippled leg dragging over the ground at a pace quite remarkable? All his struggling efforts confessed a fear that his daughter might overtake him and try to hold him back.

Once he paused. Abruptly halting in the road, he looked back—looked wistfully back, and even kissed his hand to her; but still emptily gazing into space, his Winifred made no response.

As he hobbled forward he once dropped his walking stick; and a long, panting labour had to be gone

through in order to recover that necessary cane. Again, the empty bottle slipped from him.

Smartly the thing hit the ground, and having splintered all to pieces, it lay there like a great shower of tears, brightly a-sparkle in the sun.

"No matter," Barton gasped, and his teeth gritted.

He must have realized, suddenly, his own strangeness, and like a drunkard he assumed a fantastic dignity. Only his loftiness was less absurd than ghastly. Under the ragged gray of his moustache his blue lips had begun to twitch with curious jerkings. He gravely and gently spoke the words: "Yes—yes!" as if his daughter, whom he fancied to be walking beside him, had been gently assuring him: "Here I am, Father. I will never leave you."

But she need not suppose he would be going back home with her. He kept stalking along, persistently dragging himself forward. Once in view of the unpainted and windowless little church a spurt of desperate strength seemed to come flooding into him; he was like a grotesque spectre, as he went floundering off up the slope in hobbling, painful haste.

Of those in the minister's house, Doctor North was first to behold this belated wedding guest; and instantly, as the eccentric figure with the bright-hued serape began its laboured and fantastic ascent, the young man rushed out to call solicitously:

"Careful, Hugh! Not so fast. Come slowly—slowly!"

The grizzled guest, heaving and panting, gasped out the question:

"Am I . . . in time?"

Close behind the doctor Alice had appeared; and

at once Hugh Barton paid her the respect of a salute. He bowed gallantly, giving his battered hat a wide and ceremonious sweep, down to his knees.

"In time?" he puffily questioned once again, with Doctor North supporting him by the arm. "Am I in time?"

Soothingly the bridegroom answered:

"You're not too late. No, indeed. He's coming now. I mean, the minister. We've been waiting for him. See, Victor is bringing him."

"Well, then," the stricken man droned heavily, "in time!"

Instantly he collapsed. He went limp all over and sank, falling as a blanket falls. The supporting arms of the young man eased him to the ground, and when the shaggy head lay resting against Doctor North's knee, with the shirt-collar rent open to give a chance for freer breathing, Winifred's father did not struggle in the least. He lay there in the green grass, his crippled arm and leg woefully twisted awry, while the warm June sunshine went on smiling warmly down into the deathly quiet of his face.

He still lived. By the faint flutter of his eyelids one could see that he did.

Alice had brought a pitcher of water from the house, for even in a crisis such as this she would be one to keep her presence of mind. With a wet handkerchief—a dainty thing of fragile lace, her bride's handkerchief, she began wiping the gray face and the pallid lips.

Hugh Barton, even in the fading twilight of his faculties, seemed to know very well who she was. His mouth moved, he was trying to speak, he actually did contrive to make his gasping breaths understood:

"Death at a wedding. . . . Forgive."

His voice trailed off into silence, but laboured still to be heard. A few words, foreign words, a phrase of Spanish courtesy must have been meant for her.

"I kiss your hands," he said, and repeated it a second time: "I kiss your hands."

Then—silence.

The minister, summoned for a wedding service, could now do no more than speak gently a solemn liturgy for the dead.

"Man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain. He cometh up, and is cut down like a flower."

Thus it befell that in a few strokes of a builder's hammer, a short while only had been given time for the arrival of this grim guest, who had indeed come in time. Yes, amply in time—to spoil everything!

CHAPTER IV

Lies!

BEFORE the praying of the minister began, Alice and Harry North drew aside for a brief bit of council to determine whether this service for the dead should be followed presently by the marriage service. It was the opinion of the bridegroom that—

"Awhile later, perhaps, we could. . . . But shall we? A much happier day, my dear, I would like to have for our wedding."

She looked at him, and then at her lace-edged handkerchief, formerly so light and dainty, and now but a sodden thing, all crumpled and wet, with the dew of death upon it.

"Some other day," she began, and pressed her lower lip between her teeth. "Well, yes," she added. "I suppose it's best."

Would she, he inquired, be the one to take the news to Hugh Barton's daughter? Or should it be Victor?

"He or I could do it," Alice conceded. "But no, Hal, I think you had better be the one to let her know what has happened. Her father liked you so much, and you will know how to do the thing tactfully."

Unenviable as the mission might be, Harry North started away at once, going off with long strides; and as it turned out, the one whom he had gone to

seek remained precisely in the place where Victor had left her. She had not moved from the doorstep. An oblique shadow of the house, broadening by slow degrees, had at last enveloped her; and now, perfectly impassive, she inclined forward, with head so a-droop that one might have fancied it pulled down by the regal wealth of hair black-purple in its trailing mass.

Only when Harry North had drawn near and spoken her name did the slow conviction reach Winifred that she was no longer alone.

That voice!

Her head slowly lifted, she listened, and a pallid arm raised itself to put aside from her face the dark-mantling cloud of rumpled hair.

"You?" she questioned; and then, having accepted the unlikely circumstance of his presence, as one accepts the remarkable happenings of a dream, she quietly added: "You, then!"

Had he sprung up out of the ground or dropped from the sky, she would scarce have been concerned with the manner of his coming. Enough that he was here!

Now that he had her attention, North looked down into her museful eyes—looked, and stood silent.

It remained for her to end the long silence. She asked simply and directly, with the voice he had been used to hearing:

"Is it all over?"

He deliberately answered:

"It is over."

Bravely responsive, she at once brought herself to her feet; and standing very erect, did not shirk the

thing courteous to do. She smiled. She put forth her hand.

"I," she said, "congratulate you."

He took her hand between both of his and pressed it firmly; but seeing how greatly she had mistaken what he meant, he stood mute for a time.

"The wedding," he presently began, and cleared his throat, "the wedding, Winnie, has been postponed."

Baffled wonderment came into her eyes. "What?" she asked, and when told a second time that the nuptial service had not been held, she still kept her look of mystification.

"No wedding? But that can't be so."

"Conditions," he went on, "have been such that . . . Unforeseen circumstances. . . . Yes," he insisted, "postponed."

A jerky tremor twitched her hand.

"Not married?"

"It couldn't be," he answered. "Not to-day, because something. . . . I don't know how to tell you. . . . Your father, Winnie. . . ."

"Couldn't go," she explained. "Awfully sorry, but he couldn't. Victor was to tell you. But it seems. . . . *Not married!*" she exclaimed.

Astounding fact! But she grasped it, she clung to it. In her eyes kindled a gleam which boded no good for this young man. Hope had blazed up. Fugitive and sudden, it was a wild, crafty, desperate hope!

Winifred watched the moving lips of Doctor North. He must be saying something. It even came to her that he was speaking of her father. And at once she turned her head, to call through the doorway:

"Come, Dadums, listen! There's been no wedding. It's been postponed. Do you hear? But why, Hal North, has it been postponed?"

Eager and impatient, she stamped her foot and started to call again to her father.

"Oo, but he's gone out!" she exclaimed. "How stupid of me not to remember that!—Sit down, Hal. You must tell me all about it."

"But first, Winifred, where is he? Where's your father?"

Why, not home, gone out. She saw him go. Yes, with his medicine bottle, to the drug store.

"But tell me," she implored. "Let me hear exactly how it was."

Only he did not begin to tell. He swallowed, he looked at the ground; he had the paleness and the reticence of a man to whom strange things have been disclosed. What things? The girl could not wait to hear them told.

"I see it," she cried. "You found out, at the last moment, that she and your brother. . . . But how did you find out? Who told you?"

"No, Winnie, no; that's not it!"

Startled protest sounded in North's voice.

"Then what is it you mean?" she insisted; and his helplessness, his confusion further convinced her that the feeling she had discovered in Victor North, the adoring partiality for Alice Arden, had somehow been betrayed. When betrayed, and how, and by whom—as passionately curious as Winnie Barton was to hear all this, she hugged to her soul the one amazing fact: the wedding had been postponed.

"So, then," she exclaimed, "the truth is out! But how long it's taken you to see the truth. Deceiving yourself all this while that it was you, and not your brother she cared for."

"Enough!" he exclaimed. "This talk, Miss Barton, doesn't interest me. I don't care to hear it. I won't hear it."

"Won't you, though? Well, no matter now—now that you see what's in that pinched, puritan soul of hers. Promised to marry you. Yes, and really did love you once. No doubt she did, but not any more. Duty! Love went, but duty stayed. She thought it her duty to marry you, instead of the man she really loved."

"Stop, Winnie! The wedding is postponed only because your father. . . ."

He could not get her attention. He might as well have tried to reason with the wind, or to make the doorstep understand the tidings he had brought.

"This long while," she went on, "you've suspected, you've almost known what they meant to each other, those two. But you tried not to believe. Blind, blind—and you wanted to be blind! Ah, you men! It takes you so very long to see what's in a woman's heart! But Victor sees, right enough. Loves her, too; always *has* loved her. Only he . . . another queer fish! Thought it fine and honourable to be giving her up. You and she were promised. So, of course, she must stand by her promise. He thought that; they both did. And they felt so lofty and virtuous about it. Went in for self-sacrifice. Wanted to make martyrs of themselves. Fools! The precious pair of high-minded fanatics!"

Could there be any truth in this? Alice to love Victor! Might it be possible? Do such things happen?

Harry North must have time to think of this. But not now. This, surely, was not the time; for soon they would be bringing the body. Winifred had to be told. He tried to recall what he had prepared to say, and the discreet manner of saying it, in order that the news might not fall as a stroke too rude and brutally abrupt.

"Try, Winnie," he urged with a beseeching tone, "do please try to listen. Your father—it's about him I've come to you. That he should suffer so much was not, you know, the worst thing about his case. The worst of it was that he would always have to suffer. Yes, always."

"He won't be long," she insisted, with thoughts still fugitive. "Be right back."

"Suppose, Winnie—suppose your father were quite done with all the pain he has borne so quietly!"

North moistened his lips. "You think," he began again, "that he will be coming soon. But—no, Winnie, he won't. Not as a living man. His pain is all ended. Your father is dead."

"Dead?"

Her lips went tight shut. After a time, when she had gazed long into North's pale face, she spoke colourlessly, as if making a commonplace announcement:

"He should have lived. I had only him. . . . Dead, then."

In the long pause following one might have supposed she was trying to think what the future would be without her father in it. But when she spoke

again, "Not married," were the words she uttered. "Not married," she repeated.

She was told that her father had hurried too fast; that he fancied he would be late. "Too much of a hurry," North explained. "Overtaxed his heart."

The event now seemed as something which had happened long, long ago, and to be a thing less sorry than this other:

"Vic—good old Vic . . . he and Alice. It might be. At times I have wondered, but never understood. I have been very dense." He smiled mournfully. "I thank you, Winnie. You have opened my eyes. Such stupid eyes! It must mean that they, she and Vic, have not wanted to hurt me." After a pause he said once again: "I have been very dense."

Winnie could not bear to look at him. He stood so straight! And into his face had come a firmness and gentleness which quite humbled the girl. All the womanhood in her suddenly cried out in pity and in shame.

"You mustn't believe that," she pleaded. Her hand had begun to stroke his arm with a timorous fondling. "Lies, madness," she was declaring, "jealous babble! All lies!" North looked at her, but could not well understand what she was saying. "Dead!—and I have shamed him. With my lies. You're not going to believe them, though. Eh, are you? You mustn't. Lies, all lies!"

She waited, tensely watchful for any change in that still face of his; and then, "See, Hal," she went on, with a hush coming into her voice, "they are bringing him home now."

It was true. Six hatless carriers bore upon their shoulders the plank requisitioned as a hearse; and a bright-hued pall, the Mexican serape used as a covering, described a curve, with ridges at head and foot. Trailing folds, meanwhile, kept up a slow rippling. Once a lifeless arm, loosely falling from the board, swung with a curious limpness until replaced under the striped cloth beside the form laxly a-sway in time to the tread of men funereally marching.

"Bringing him home," she whispered; "they are bringing home my father who is dead. But I am not thinking of him. It's you, dear boy—I am thinking of you. I want you to have your happiness. Go to her. She worships you. Go to her. Tell her I have told lies. Tell her I have disgraced my father's name. Let her know, once for all, that I am not to see you again."

CHAPTER V

Farewell

FUTILE regrets! Unavailing effort to bite back what she had so passionately avowed! Grass seed that has been scattered upon the ground and rooted there would be no more impossible to gather up than those words of Winifred Barton that had cruelly struck root in the heart of Harry North.

In the days after her father's death he brooded constantly over what she had said concerning Victor and Alice. And for all his struggling endeavour to deny the possibility of their attachment, he could not crush the thought that Winifred, in her unbridled moment of impulse, had ruthlessly spoken the truth.

Yet how suggest to Alice this desolating suspicion? No, the old adage was probably right: "Least said, soonest mended." He would say nothing. Impossible, in any case, to broach now the subject of the postponed wedding.

What Alice was thinking he could not fathom; and the fancy was ever with him that she might be hoping for release from her betrothal. She seemed more constrained, he thought, than ever before. He slept badly with thinking of it, and finally decided to go away.

That was the thing: go away. Never allow her to

make the self-sacrifice which a mistaken sense of loyalty might require of her. Depart, say nothing, behave magnanimously.

Having so decided, he one evening sat musefully gazing at the luminous light-ring outspread under the roof above the tallow dip. And he heard his brother inquire:

"Going to start West, are you, with a load of goods for the Pike's Peak country?"

"It's not much of a trip," Harry North answered. "Twenty-seven days. Yes, since I am running short of cash, I shall soon be starting West with a load of merchandise."

Victor spoke again, and now, after a long pause, with more than his wonted gravity:

"Alice doesn't want you to go."

"Doesn't? Has she told you?"

This time, speaking with a tone edged with asperity, the elder brother said:

"Don't be quite an ass. Can't you see for yourself that she doesn't want you to go?"

Even had Victor North striven to be more urgently persuasive, he could have accomplished nothing. Harry would not remain. A week passed; then came the day of his departure.

At the foot of the hill, where the foot-path begins the ascent of the slope toward the vine-clad cabin, stood his ponderous wagon, heavily wheel-locked with a stout chain. It was one of those freighting vans, high-sided, slate-gray in colour, and staunchly ribbed into panels. The canvas sheeting, new and white, shone in the sun, a fleckless expanse like a hooding of snow.

In the hold of this stout-wheeled craft the amateur freighter was bustling about. Full a quarter of an hour ago he had been called to dinner, to the good-bye dinner which he was to share with Alice and the children; and now sundry readjustments of the load were being made to serve as a pretext for further delay.

The original loading of the wagon, in Omaha, had naturally been done with exacting care, to give an equal distribution of weight; but now a dallying shift had been made of coffee bags, of paper-wrapped bales of calico, and even of the barrels.

While thus keeping himself occupied, Doctor North presently heard Connie's shrill treble again announcing:

"Dinner's ready. Aunt Al says, 'Please, Dockey, come to dinner'."

"Yes, little boy; all right. Presently, presently."

The small brothers had been with him at the wagon, ever since it arrived, only leaving on brief errands to inform Alice about the wonderfully long new whip, or about the bumble bee that *bumbled* right into the wagon and lit on a molasses barrel.

This great news, however, had been quietly received. She hardly gave the children a smile. All the forenoon she had kept busy, making much ado over trifles, and even putting fresh papers on the cupboard shelves, although the scalloped ones she took off were scarcely soiled in the least. To get dinner ready required a long time, seeing that she had grown so curiously forgetful and incompetent.

Victor North, it appeared, was not to be present at this leave-taking. Through some motive, perhaps

through delicacy, he had made his excuses for absenting himself from the farewell dinner.

Had he been here, he might well have been surprised at the atmosphere of seeming well content. Doctor North ate with appreciative gusto. It grew markedly noticeable, too, that during the whole course of the meal he and Alice kept up a conversation of some sort. They talked and talked; and yet made no reference to the far journey across the plains. Their volubility suggested that such a journey is nothing much. Not worth mentioning.

Alice, it is true, presently observed:

"In the pocket of your jacket I've put a little sewing case, a housewife, with needles and thread and buttons. It might, I thought, come in handy, if you have to do any mending."

The young man gave unstinted thanks. So thoughtful of her! He really didn't know how it was that she could always think of such things.

It surprised Alice more than a little that he could go on eating so heartily. One might even suppose that he had quite as lusty an appetite as the two little boys.

Florence, however, seemed to have a difficulty with swallowing. Finally she pushed back from the table, to get up hurriedly and hasten away into the adjoining room.

Doctor North looked at the closed door; he looked, and breathed deeply, but after a time went on talking with his customary tone:

"My oxen seem to be good roadsters. I shall have them shod if the ground gets too dry. Prevents lameness, you know."

Did he yearn to follow the little girl, and press her face between his palms?—her sweet face which had in it the kind of look which was known to please him wonderfully well? Would he like to console the child by talking with her, out of his heart, with gentle and comforting words? Perhaps so. Yet one could not tell whether his quiet manner expressed restraint or mere indifference.

It could well be, Alice thought, indifference. Every minute of the time he might be wishing to be through with this dinner, to finish with leave-taking, and be off. She gazed into his eyes to see if this could be so. Baffled and wondering, she tried to read in his face whether he knew aught about the unexplained vanishment of that strange girl of the prairies.

Supposing he knew the whereabouts of Winifred Barton, what then? Might there be an understanding between them? What if she, by some mysterious means, had been the instigator of this needless freighting project?

Deeply intent, Alice looked and looked. But could make out nothing. For what is to be disclosed by a sun-browned face inscrutable as stone?

It shamed her to have suspicions; yet here they were, these troubling doubts. For what is one to think? He was leaving. He had not made her his wife. Going away! And wherefore?

The need of money, as he would have it understood, might truly be the motive. This freighting enterprise, to be sure, promised returns modestly profitable. But did not the business have in it something more than a financial consideration?

It must have, or else he would here establish a medical practice to supply himself with means.

But—no help for it—he was leaving. In the need to question him Alice brought herself to ask, with a well-contrived effect of casualness:

"What have you heard from Miss Barton?"

"Why, nothing." He quietly let it be known that after her father's funeral she had left, but for what place no one seemed to know. He had a notion that she might have returned to her aunt.

After a reflective pause Alice hazarded the opinion that "At the burial service the young lady didn't show much grief—didn't seem deeply moved. People have mentioned her odd behaviour."

Doctor North could see nothing very unusual in such conduct. "If," he said, "she remained tearless during that ordeal, it was doubtless because the violence of her grief had spent itself."

Presently he again spoke of her. She had mourned, he said. Oh, yes!—yes, indeed, she had.

Silence lasted for rather a painful pause before Alice asserted in a tone of perplexed wonderment:

"She wouldn't come home with me from the funeral. I asked her, and she thanked me. But wouldn't come."

"It was nice of you, Alice, to do that—to ask her."

They both knew, the whole settlement knew, that the girl had gone back, alone, to the echoing emptiness of the sod house; and next morning, as it turned out, she and her horse had vanished. Ever since then the mystery of that abrupt departure had been a disturbing circumstance more troubling to Alice than she would have cared to have any one suspect.

If only she dared ask candidly whether Harry North, in crossing the plains, planned to see that—that person! But one doesn't, of course, ask such a question. She merely tortures herself; prepares, somehow, to combat the poignant appeal which a girl, in her sorrow, may be likely to make to a man's sensibilities.

Alice could not help feeling, of late, that Harry North was keeping something back from her. She was sure of it. But there must be, she thought, some way of drawing near to him in sympathetic confidence; some way to bring back the sweetness and open-hearted trust of the good years gone by. He should not, at least, be permitted to leave this house with a face as grave and sternly determined as it now appeared.

So, the dinner things having been cleared away, Alice brought the Bible, and put it into her lover's hands, and waited for him to read comforting words. But he did not read. For some time he merely held the book—absently held it—and looked away. When his voice finally did make itself heard, it was only to quote a grim text, with the arid emphasis of a judge passing sentence:

"'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'"

Hastily the young woman took the heavy volume from him. She took it, and opened it, and having turned to the sixth chapter of Numbers, anxiously called her little niece. Then, when Florence had come in, with eyes all red and swollen, her aunt said quietly, as she spread the book open upon the table:

"He is going into a far country. Doctor North is

leaving us. We do not know when we shall see him again. Read, my dear, read for us those verses."

Her fingers having indicated the place, the frail voice of the much-beloved little girl was raised in gentle benediction:

"'The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make His face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.'"

Silence held the room. Arthur had put his arm about little brother, who felt the sorrow of the older people, and was beginning to cry.

"Peace!" In a timid voice Doctor North had repeated the word. But he shook his head over it, and got up, and went his way.

Afterward, when the yoked oxen, four heavy-headed beasts, had been attached to the wagon-chain, Alice came forth from the house, leading Arthur by the hand, and carrying a stuffed carpet-bag. Quite disdaining the protestations of the young man, she determinedly lifted the little boy to the seat of the heavy vehicle.

"This won't do," Doctor North was saying. "I can't take him with me. It's not the thing."

Alice Arden did not reply. She merely stowed the carpet-bag into the wagon; and Arthur heard her saying with a strange gentleness:

"You will see to it that Dockey North takes care of himself while he is gone away. You will go with him, and stay with him, and then God will not let him forget us."

PART V

SONG

CHAPTER I

Night's Symphony

WORN out with walking all the afternoon, Arthur had gone to sleep on the wagon-seat; and in time to the jouncing of the ponderous vehicle his limp arm swung jerkily, like an eccentric pendulum, the hand and wrist now richly washed by the golden afterglow. In the deepening dusk Doctor North sometimes walked ahead of his team for an investigation of the road, in order to avoid the deep-rutted places and muddy hollows.

All the prairie, it seemed to him, had begun to rejoice that the garish day was done. The circled slash of the horizon had contracted, and the coming night began to soothe the eye with colours delicately grave, so that even the green of the grass, the harsh new green of early summer, soberly hid its harshness in the vast drench of darkness which translucently drowned the land, rising from the ground itself, one knew not how, nor when.

At such a time the plains grow less afraid. The country, at last, dares to breathe, but begins to do so with trillings timorously shy, an experimental tuning up. For each insect knows how very little it is; and being an atom so shamefully small, how can it help being abashed by its own boldness? Yet with their first audacity going unrebuked, the wee fiddlers grow

less deprecatory. They answer one another. Their assurance keeps increasing. All the solitudes begin to tingle with stilly notes, with oceans full of tiniest voices now singing in the joy, in the freshness, in the gracious cooling of the lovely, lovely night!

The man listened. Vague rustlings stirred in the grass. A meadow mouse squeaked. Perhaps slow land-turtles crawled, or toads hopped, or the stealthy serpent sinuously slid. From among the black bristle of sword-leafed cat-tails growing in a slough the frogs had begun their quaking storm of tones, a chaos of metallic tremolos, tiny trebles, and glum bassos deeply throbbing.

But the chuck and clack of the wagon frightened the swamp-chorusers; they grew still, they waited, and presently began again with a faint prickle of trills, as if not quite sure of hazards safely past.

What a different prairie was this from the prairie of a little while ago! Night life had awakened. It was awake and singing its song of mysteries. From everywhere came the respiration of the darkened earth. Silences grew articulate. Space itself breathed out a drowse of muted thunderings. All the coolness quivered with horny buzz of beetle wings, with rodent gnawings, with keening shrill of gnats, and the deep hum of the moth's wet-winged flutterings.

The night's witchery, this miracle of the commonplace, had also its human note. Someone was singing: a boy, a woman—who can say? Tenuous, distant, indefinable, a vocalist had begun one of those melodies, half remembered, which haunt the mind yet elude indentification. Dominating the prairie's somnolence of song, this musical utterance came

pulsing not merely out of the star-lit spaciousness, but out of a past experience. North had heard it before. Surely he had. But where? But when?

Tantalized by his inability to recall the sadly tender songfulness, the young man stopped his team the better to listen; but with the halting of the oxen and the heavy vehicle the singing also halted. Only the unseeable orchestras of the grassy plains continued their small, pensive, multitudinous nocturne.

North called to his team, the wagon creaked, the swell of canvas began once more its gray and corpulent wabbling. And the heavy roll of wheels had rumbled on for some time before the song, vaguely reminiscent, began to infuse a certainty of cadence into the tiny trilling and shrilling pulsations of the prairies. A Mexican herd-boy, North thought, might be singing as he made his rounds of grazing cattle from some wagon-train, perhaps a freighters' outfit encamped beyond the line of the close and bleared horizon.

It was not a wordless song, it had verses; but what they were, in what tongue, whether Spanish or English, could not be determined. Strive as he would to make them out, the listener could not even be certain of the much-repeated refrain, nor could he convince himself as to the direction whence the singing came. Near or far, to right or to left, it seemed detached from the prairie, seemed vagrantly floating about; at times it even seemed to quiver over his head, as it might be some magic music wrought by the crystal throbbing of the stars.

In his yearning to pluck out the mystery of this

enchantment, or at least to freshen a faded memory of the voice formerly heard and now forgotten, North presently grew perplexed by yet another marvel—by a mystical flushing of the east. Why, he wondered, should the sky be brightening there with that tenderness of tint, a hushed and warm serenity of colouring? What if a haystack, gloriously afire in a meadow far distant, were reflecting its blaze in the placid and star-pricked profundities? Or might not that solemn blush, so exquisitely luminous, be a fragile forecast of the drowsy moon's deliberate rising?

Quite so: the moon! Birds twittered, whippoorwills began to call, the happy-throated meadowlark could not keep himself asleep, but sang, mistaking for the modest dawn this peep of slumberous nudity, this rayless and rose-perfect curve of a divinity's shoulder.

Languorously, meanwhile, the prairie continued its monotonous hymning. With the torpid moon, big and round and yellow, now mounting higher in its pride of place, the moist night throbbed more deeply than ever, rejoicing that the sultry day should be done—done and forgotten in this delectable freshness blessing the land.

Presently the man and his team passed through a warm strata of air smelling acridly of hay; again he scented sharp, weedy odours of plants crushed by wagons long since passed, and later still an earthy fragrance came to him, exhaled from a field newly broken by the plough.

Again Doctor North took pleasure in a cool caress of moisture on his face; for the trail had dipped

through a hollow bordering a swamp where water darkly shone, and where tussocks of reed-grass bent in a tousled and listening hush. Into one of the black pools a star had dropped a crumpled fish-line of silver fire.

The plodding wayfarer could not but take satisfaction in that reflection, in the night itself, in the moist breathing of the prairie, and, most of all, in the far-distant song, once more beginning. It happened, besides, that an odour now evoked the stubborn secret which North's memory had long refused to yield. For here, as it chanced, he recalled that once, after a rain, the prairie had a wet and grassy smell exactly like this; and the song, *this* song, had then, for the first time, come vaguely and elusively floating to his ears.

Rollins had sung it. Old Rollins, proud of his beard and of his voice, he was the one who had been singing that song to keep the cattle quiet. It was a tune, formless and rude, a trail-song bemoaning the sorrows of the herd, telling of horny hoofs knocking at the frozen water-hole, of cold and sleet and hail, of sun-blinded creatures bellowing in the blistering dust. But the chorus gave comfort; manfully and ruggedly it encouraged the poor beasts to taste the wind, the tang of the wind, the wine of the big winds blowing.

What zest and lustiness old Rollins could put into that refrain! But who, this night, could be singing that song of the cattle trail? Whose voice might it be that came throbbing, now mournfully, now triumphantly, into the prairie-wide pulsations of the vast night's solemn symphony?

CHAPTER II

Ghost Song

IT WAS to spare his oxen that Doctor North did not travel during the heat of the day, in the hours of greatest torridity; and three nights out of the four, since he began this westward plodding, his ears had drunk of that music—a music which might have seemed of celestial origin except for its poignant strain of tender sadness.

By day, in the fierce sunshine, in his dusty fatigue, he succumbed to disillusionment. Along some wheel-track or other (the prairie being cut up into many trails) a wagon-train would nearly always be in view. Mormon caravans, made up of handcarts and ponderous vans, might often inspirit their going by hymns lustily sung. Not merely these "church trains," as they were called, but immigrant trains (when encamped after dark) would songfully divert themselves. How be sure, then, that he had heard the same vocalist more than once? Any squawker distantly heard might send forth tones easily idealized into vocal magic. The night-time, besides, is so deceitful! It has such a way of poetizing the prosaic and the commonplace!

After dark, on the fifth day, heat-lightning twitched and quivered, far off along the horizon, while cloud masses in torn banks, chasms, craggy grotesques,

abruptly disclosed themselves against the bluish flares torching monstrously behind them.

On the cushion of the wagon-seat Arthur was roused from sleep by a gruff tone harshly demanding:

"What's up? *Now* what?"

Confused hubbub sounded in the night: weary oaths, creakings, whip snappings. Chiefly, however, the commotion seemed made up of rumbling vibrations, glum and ponderous, like distant thunder gradually losing its strength and dying out. An ox-train, a far-extending caravan, was coming to a halt.

In lachrymose complaint an accusing voice in the darkness shouted:

"Dobe Dan again! Hang me, if he ain't shed another tire!"

"The hell he has!"

"That's it; that's what he's done."

"Shove on an extra wheel, why don't he?"

"And Wick Hazen's lead yoke," someone else was reporting, "has went and split on him. Looks like we better lay by and corral for the night. Don't it?"

Odours tepid and acrid, a smell of dust and of cattle, rose strongly from the night. In the darkness Arthur could see the train and the oxen smirchily shaped. One yoke of light-coloured bullocks, having lain down with legs doubled under them, seemed to have converted themselves into twin boulders. Past the draft animals and the wagons several men, who looked like sooty shapes, kept moving along. The bulge of the wagon tops, whenever the heat-lightning bluishly glimmered, stood

forth, prominently clipped out. The canvas tops, being on a level with the boy's vision, looked swollen and high, but each team of oxen appeared small, with legs much shorter than common.

All this arrested motion of the long train was nothing Arthur need bother about. He stretched himself, yawned, and for a time watched the firefly atoms balancing everywhere in myriads of emerald flecks leisurely glowing.

"Clean split," a wagon man was declaring. "Got to be banded, I guess."

Another person declared regretfully: "Grass along here is et off tolerable close. But we'll corral anyhow, I reckon. Best we can do."

Through his dozy state the little boy heard a resonant shout and the pistol-like snap of a whip. An ox-driver was starting his team. A tar-bucket clanked, a distant wagon began to creak, then another, and another, and another, until the whole train, by slow degrees, finally got under way. Moving ponderously northward, alternate vans passed to right and left, thus halving the caravan into divergent arms which soon came together, forming a pair of colossal parentheses. The place where the head teams began to halt had evidently been the camping-ground of some other train, for now and again one heard in the darkness the clink of a tin can as it was knocked about by hoof or teamster's boot.

Arthur slept, but did not long remain asleep. Upon awaking he saw that a number of canvas tops had taken on a wavering russet tinge from the doubtful light of fires newly kindled, and in grotesque shadow show black caricatures of people sometimes moved

back and forth across the wagons. A tang of smoke, a smell of cookery, and a good aroma of boiling coffee came up to him.

Growing hungry at once, the boy threw off the tarpaulin protecting him fron the evening's dampness; and as he began to swing cautiously down from his place, treading on tire and hub of a fore-wheel, he heard an unfamiliar voice say genially:

"Hullo, there. Have you had a good snooze?"

The one speaking to him, a man in much-begrimed buckskin clothes, with knees and elbows worn shiny, had obviously built the fire. Arthur wanted to respond to his friendliness, but feeling estranged by the wagon-camp, and by this unwonted presence, he did not speak, but stood gazing all about in troubled perplexity.

"Don't fret yourself," the stranger added, reassuringly, while from a brown and corpulent bag he brought forth a disc-like slab, a buffalo chip, as fuel for the fire. "Your father will be back after a little. Gone down to the river to water his horse, along with the rest of the stock."

"Oh!" said Arthur, and tried to say it with showy unconcern. He was minded to let the mistake about the paternal relationship go unchallenged. But would that be honest? "He's not my father—not quite. We're partners." He would have liked to say something more; he wanted to go on talking, easily and naturally, to the stranger. That would be such a mannish thing to do! But his conversational accomplishment did not extend further than the swaggering announcement as to partnership.

In thick, wavy masses the man's yellow hair

brushed forward upon his shoulders as he bent over the fire. The long locks must have bothered his eyes only that they were held back by a willow withe such as Indians often wear about their heads on windy days.

"Partners, eh?" The man seemed to ponder this as something worthy of profound consideration; then he asked: "Not an orphan?"

Arthur wished to deny his orphanhood, as something objectionable, if not downright disgraceful. So he said: "I've been staying awhile with my Aunt Alice, at Tecon City." One gathered that it had been for a short visit only. But the little boy was afraid that the deplorable truth would have to come out, because the man was the kind that asks questions.

"Have you some brothers?"

"One."

"And sisters?"

"One sister."

The stranger's face, richly coloured with sun and wind, and now aglow in the fireshine, had taken on a museful look. Arthur presently heard him saying:

"They will be changed. I must expect that. My own little people—that's what I mean. There are three of them, three brothers. I keep wondering how much they have grown, and thus and so, and what they're going to look like. Hugh, I shouldn't wonder, might be nearly as big as you are by now. And the baby? (Sky Boy, his mother calls him. Blue eyes, same as mine; and she calls him Sky Boy.) He will no longer be carried on her back, or have his cradle hung up in a tree while she works. He would

be running about, I suppose . . . this long while."

Thus the man went on talking, and seemed not to notice in the least what an inattentive audience he had; for he was the sort to speak out of his heart the memories which came to him. Lonely men often form the habit of soliloquy. They give their confidences to dogs, or horses, or oxen, and perhaps gain comfort from talking to dumb creatures who would like to understand, and really do understand much more than people are wont to suppose.

While the man at the fire went on meditating aloud in regard to his little boys, a hunchbacked person, dark as a shadow, bent down and came under a raised wagon-tongue, as under a fence bar. The heavy pole, whose tip rested against the inner hub of a rear wheel, formed one of the many similar connecting spans of the corral; for each two vans were thus solidly joined.

The dwarfish individual coming under the beamed barrier proved to be a teamster, with a whip-lash coiled under his arm. Scuffing out of the darkness into the firelight, the newcomer greeted nobody, but began to scold and to cast surly glances into the cavernous space between the wagons, whence he had emerged.

"Just see what they're at!" he railed, while crashing and splitting noises made themselves heard from the other side of the corral. "What makes 'em do that? They shouldn't. It's a shame, so it is. It's a shame."

"What is?" inquired the man in shabby buckskin.

"Such a handsome thing!" the hunchback went

on. "Elegant workmanship! A chest of drawers, Andy; a chest of drawers, English made, and old. Heavy, of course, but it don't look heavy. Graceful, you understand. Some wagon has lightened its load. Abandoned property, of course. But to smash it up—oh, dear! They shouldn't. Makes me sick. It's a disgrace."

"I know, Mat, how you feel. And you a cabinet maker. Still, that piece of furniture would only blister in the sun, and warp and twist and fall to pieces."

"Chippendale—that's what it is. You just ought to feel the joints: how fine and perfect. And the carving on it! But now, hear that? Oh, the ruffians! A shame, it's a shame!"

Another man, gauntly detaching himself from the darkness, brightened in the firelight. "What's up, Shorty?" he asked. "What are you in such a stew about?" And having heard the grievance of the hunchback, the lank teamster observed reflectively:

"Queer what stuff gets scattered along the trail. A few years back, when cholera was bad on the plains, seems like everybody dumped things out: bedsteads, chairs, tables, even sacks of flour. After the general stampede, it looked like the ocean had washed up such rubbish as cast-iron stoves, cupboards, dishes, and Lord knows what. Only what gets me is how folks can be senseless enough to haul such loads and loads of useless truck."

"Gone!" the hunchback exclaimed, and vindictively slashed the darkness with his long whip. "The cut-throats have finished their job. They've chopped it up!"

"I've seen worse than that—a whole lot worse," the man in buckskin asserted. "Wait till I tell you what I saw one day along the creek that the Indians call Medicine Bow. First we came to a cow elk, dead and rotting. Followed along down the canyon, and came to another, and another, and still others. In going half a mile I counted seventeen of them. English hunters had done that. Wanted to see how much game they could kill for nothing, for no purpose at all. Well, and what do natives think of needless, stupid slaughter like that? Indians ought to be pleased, hey? Must sure love a race that calls itself civilized. Pah!" The fire hissed as he spat angrily into it.

"There's got to be game laws," the dwarfish teamster declared. "Strong laws Congress ought to make, to preserve the game. Ouch! oh, Lord," he added, "my feet have swelled on me! My boots hurt." Sitting down by the fire, he began with much grunting effort to pull them off, meanwhile giving vent to profane and puffy complaints which suddenly stopped short.

Not merely his talk, but his activity had abated; for he, like his fellows, fell a-listening to vibrations from a guitar melodiously tinkling out of the darkness. Silvery chords, light and exceedingly musical, throbbed forth in mild sonority, while a voice, colourful and low, floated into what might be called harmonic meditation, rather than song. It may not have been a wordless ballad, but if there were verses to it, one could not tell what they were; one could only feel that they were something wistfully vagrant, as if a homeless and lonely spirit, out yonder on the

prairie, might be wandering hopelessly about, and yet striving, all the while, to forget its loneliness, and be merry.

When the singing had died away and even the plucked strings had hushed their sensitive throbbings, the men here gathered about the fire, remained quite still, in strained attention, lest the song should begin again, and find them unprepared to give it all the welcome it deserved. Only when the hopeful harkening had waned to the certainty of no further reward did the men breathe deeply once more, and stir, and venture speculations regarding the vocalist. Said the man of the long yellow hair:

"It could be, maybe, the lad belonging with this pilgrim oufit. Last night I did a shift of herd-duty along with him. Might be part Mexican, I guess; anyhow, he's good on the cow *sabe*. You mind how close and sultry it was. Well, he picked out the right place for the cattle to bed down—a ridge, with a stand of last year's grass. Dry, you understand, and located where it would catch any sniff of breeze that might come fanning by. All during his watch he whistled or sang, going round and round on his horse, and giving the cattle to understand that friends were keeping guard."

Doctor North would have been interested, no doubt, in this that was said of the singer, but his return from the river was too long delayed for him to hear it, or to observe what effect the song had produced upon these, his new associates. In the good familiar way of plains folk he had elected to camp with the men, or, at least, to be a messmate of theirs for the sake of free-hearted comradeship and sociability.

Day-long plodding, however, is likely to result in the desire for early sleep. And indeed, the camp-fire groups, all about the circumference of the wagon-corral, were not long in dissolving, once the business of cooking and eating had been dispatched. Emigrant families, here and there, had pitched tents, but many a teamster merely utilized his wagon for shelter and the ground under it for bed.

For some time after the camp had hushed itself into the deep repose of heavy fatigue Doctor North remained near the faded glow of the fire, which now, filmed with ash, no longer smoked but merely breathed forth a warm odour. "Presently—presently," he answered, when Arthur asked from the blanket heap under the wagon whether it wasn't time for him to come to bed.

Bemused waiting had come to the young man. He watched the livid wizardry of the heat-lightning, the swift come and go of the ragged cloud-pageantry whose dark masses above the horizon continued to display themselves against the quiver of repeated blue-white flarings. How weirdly beautiful, and strange! Another mystery! Yes, to be sure: mystery, mystery—by day or by night mystery forever abides here. A land of astounding caprices where stern, untamed Nature knows nothing of small pettiness but is always majestical—equivocal, too—a prodigal besides! Only see, for example, what a living gemmery the wastrel has now cast abroad into the night through the utter ocean-reach of all this prairie vastness. The illimitable dark, remote and near, is wondrously a-throb not merely with a few slow sparks, orange and emerald, but with an amazing jewelled

drift of them, all space thrilled with them, the unstarred and black-blue night pricked full of them—a pulsating wilderness of little, lovely fire-flies!

How proper a setting this would be for a song, for that sad wanderer of vagrant melody already vaguely heard to-night while North was at the river. But would it be repeated? Even as he continued his waiting in pensive hope and yearning, the pretty fancy came to him of sweet sounds divined rather than heard, of a tinkling silvery prelude which presently lost itself, melting into the solitude. But timorously and elusively it began again, as if a troubadour hidden in the darkened hush might be mistrustful of something and afraid to sing.

Vocal utterance finally did risk disturbing the sleep of the camp. Ethereal notes mingled with the tiny bell notes of instrumental strings, and a little song began to take its fairy flight, so thin and mournful and fragile-sweet that one might have thought it a spirit song, a lonely and melodious ghost forlornly wandering.

At once Harry North drew off his boots. He drew them off and with fleet and cautious tread sped nimbly forth, skirting the outer curve of wagons, pausing at intervals to listen and to peer in quick-sighted efforts to detect the minstrel whose tender wistfulness so haunted the prairie silences.

Success should have been his. By this discreet, swift, and noiseless caution he should have surprised the singer; yet even the pouncing rudeness of the dash he finally brought himself to make was an impudence yielding but a poor result. In the darkness, under a particular wagon, the song had stopped short. As

he made his leap something thumped the ground, thumped with a hollow sound and vibrantly rang. But—no singer. The vocalist had vanished. Nothing requited him for his audacity save faint tremors of taut strings swooning into silence!

CHAPTER III

The Plains

IN THE gray of morning, at the time of heavy-eyed awakening, it seemed to Arthur that he had been roused by a peppery tickle in the nose and an impulse to sneeze. Doubtless the fuming of dust in the wagon-corral had evoked for him this snuffy distress; and now, in the first moments of wakefulness, the boy thought he had a circular window to look through, one with black bars arranged like the ribs of an open fan; but these, he presently realized, were merely the stout spokes of a heavy wheel.

Bugle calls sounded. Hoofs trampled the inclosure, work cattle were lowing. People moved about, whips snapped, the corral quickened into bustling activity.

Arthur noticed, besides, that the river valley had made a trough for the light of the rising sun. Everywhere a yellowing luminosity had spread itself over the ground, a brightness so powerful as to dim the breakfast fire, whose flames grew almost colourless.

Commotion increased. Oxen having been driven into the impounding wagon-circle, the dust-smudge enveloped the animals, translucently fuming like yellow smoke. Lively phantoms moved there. They were the befogged teamsters, bounding, skipping, swearing, and sometimes good-naturedly laughing, while they chased the beasts that kept making in-

tractable efforts to avoid the yoke. Bellowings rose out of the dust. A horse whinnied, and one heard the strident braying of a disconsolate mule.

Before seven o'clock the wayside village had dissolved. Here and there, like dogs following at heel, horses, colts, and cows went tagging along behind a wagon, as if the vehicle had been a travelling manger. Canvas tops were like a long string of wobbling white ducks, a procession which dipped and curved over the prairie, bowing now outward, now inward, now down and up again, according to the undulations of the wheel-track.

Presently six wagons detached themselves from the plodding caravan. This platoon moved away from the main-travelled road, bearing off by itself a little to the north; for the place occupied at the rear of the long column had grown much too disagreeable, by reason of the dust.

Of the wagoners thus isolating themselves the only one to doubt the desirability of the change was Doctor North. For to keep on going with that extended argosy of prairie schooners might be to discover, within two days or three, the identity of the mysterious singer.

After midday the wagon men rarely talked or sang. Always the heat of the afternoon—the dull, dry, aching torpor—gave a staleness to one's thoughts, blurred his memories, and silenced every interest. In the distance, to the north, you saw always the low hills, violet in colour, forming the changeless rim of the horizon. The green-bronze of the prairie wearied the mind with its flatness and its emptiness, reaching westward to distances unattainable.

Each hummock and rise of ground looked bored; earth and sky looked unutterably bored. One knew that their patience had long ago been worn to apathy by the dust of caravans endlessly passing, by the graceless jounce and wobble of wagons forever crawling here, over many trails, in sombre processionals, heavy, slow, innumerable, drearily alike.

Too long abused with sun-fire, and dust, and monotony, the land finally seemed to rebel and try to throw off its weight of arid brooding. An ashen cloud, like smoke from a magic jar, had begun to lift itself from behind a squatted hill. Men watched the cloud. Hopefully they saw it darken as it rose; and though it mounted very sluggishly, one's heart beat faster to behold the slaty vapour going up and up, with other clouds, a whole tribe of them, reluctantly following.

And now the wind! The heat began to lift. A whistling spread through the grass, racing blurs of dust ran off the road. Sometimes a twisting spiral, a gray geyser of hissing dryness, fumed skyward, mysteriously sucked up from trail and dusty wallow, from those crater openings scooped wide by horn and hoof of the bison, and by tireless gougings of the prairie winds.

The breeze strengthened, and the gustiness increased, and vast gray spiders, in size like baskets, came fantastically dancing in the wind—a horde of dry tumble-weeds blown about. Snows and rains had not rotted these strange prairie plants of last summer's growth; so, on they scurried, sapless and sombre, spinning and leaping. Now and again one of them got caught in the thick spokes of a wheel,

and there rode, going round and round for some time, before it could frantically tear itself free and go whirling on again, a weird witch-thing flying.

In the distance, beyond the place where even the last of the buffalo wallows seemed to smoke, deep rumblings began to reverberate. A giant, hiding himself under ground, had begun to laugh; or else he might be rolling an immense empty cask down his cellar stairs.

"What's that?" Arthur called out. "Is it thunder?"

It was that, certainly; but where was the good of it? Futile thunder! Nothing happened. In a very little while the spurts of fierce wind had spent themselves, being quite unable to bring the refreshment of a little rain. Soon, too, the dust settled again, the wagons grittily creaked, and in a very brief while there remained in the sky no fleck of the defeated clouds. All had fled. All, all the wild tribe of them had slunk away, frightened from the sky by the earth's vast aridity, by this stupefaction of flatness, this deadliness of unconquerable monotony.

CHAPTER IV

The Void

THAT night, after supper, Doctor North kept peering beyond the luminous circumference lit by the fire, where the gloom seemed to have a special thickness, abysmally black.

By and by, having touched Big Andy's arm, he quietly observed: "Something moves out yonder."

The plainsman answered: "I hear it."

"A horse?"

"It is not a horse."

Andy put his ear to the ground, harkened awhile, and asserted that it might be a stray ox wandering about, or else some old buffalo which strong young bulls, according to their practice, had horned out of the herd. "The poor beast would like to graze, but he can't graze much, for his teeth are bad. They go roaming lonesomely about, those old fellows, and fight off the wolves while their strength lasts, as long as they are able."

Half aloud, North murmured: "Not a horse, then." One knew he had hoped it would be a horse; for the rider of such an animal might be the one who sings out of the darkness a song refreshing to the heart of a man.

"Merely an ox, or an old buffalo," he repeated.

After the others had gone off, each with blankets

to make a bed under his wagon, Arthur wished that the man in buckskin would also go away. But while Doctor North kept peering into the darkness, all the time listening for sounds in the night, Big Andy still lingered here by the fire, gazing at the thin smoke and at the ash graying deliberately over the red coals. Sometimes he turned his head to look pensively at the smooth, warm bronze of the childish face; and once, clearing his voice, he reflectively murmured that they would certainly be changed; that he must expect his three boys to be greatly changed. By wistful degrees he began talking more openly of them, and about their mother, Singing Thrush. A long while he talked, even though the small listener wriggled and considered it very tiresome gabble, all this which had never before been confided to any one.

"Their mother," Andy was saying, "is a Dakota woman. When I went away she didn't make a rumpus. Afraid she would, but she didn't. She began to pack up everything, and to take down the lodge. For she didn't understand; she thought she was going with me—— So I had to tell her that was not the way of it. Made her understand I was going back to my people. Going home, that's it—going by myself—going home. Even then no tears. She turned her palms upward toward the sky, and next held them toward the ground, and then passed her hands down over me. It was prayer. She was asking the Sun-Father and our Mother, the Earth, to guide me and bless me, and keep me. No tears. She, I mean, didn't let me see her cry, but I remember what she said. She tried to use English, because she thought I would like that. 'Mebbeso you going

come back to us sometime. Because for why? For because we love you'."

Big Andy fell silent, all the while looking beyond the feeble radius of fire-glow into the night where everything appeared very dark.

"At first," he went on, "I didn't mean to tell her I was going away. I even started off without telling. But I was not doing right. I knew it. I felt mean and cowardly—a regular sneak. So, then, I had to turn back. I took her some presents: calico, needles, some awls to use in making skin covers for the lodge—— Yes, well; I went back. I told her how it was. I told her, and afterward I could not forget her. I tried. Over two years I have been gone. I have been in the war, a soldier for three months. And I could not forget." He looked at Arthur again, stroked the boy's soft hair, and musefully smiled. "Now, you see, I am on my way to find them, my little boys. To find them, and their mother, Singing Thrush."

Doctor North groped for the fingers gently stroking Arthur's hair; and as the two men linked hands, they did not look at each other, but looked only into the night, into the black, black void.

CHAPTER V

Skulls

A CITY thoroughfare could not be more jammed with traffic than was the main street of this prairie settlement, in the heart of the Pawnee country, the village of Columbus. Now passed a flock of bleating sheep, a woolly mass of them dustily blurring along in the wake of wagons bound for Oregon. Shouts resounded. Two train masters, in heated altercation, vehemently disputed as to which of them should be given right of way. Some score of mules, in a loose herd, came straggling along, following the lead of a gray mare whose bell clanked monotonously.

Sultry smells emanated from the commotion: odours of tar and sweat and a dry fragrance of hay. All of these exhalations seemed more acridly penetrating by reason of a tune which some fifer had begun, while a teamster, exhibiting his dexterity, kept a long ox-whip snapping in time to the harsh and high-pitched shrillings.

As the wide street was congested with draft animals and wagons, so was the space in front of the post-office densely thronged. The delivery window could only be reached after waiting a long while in the line of people extending out upon the walk in serpentine convolutions.

Not understanding why Big Andy should stand apart from the line of humanity ever working on, by gradual stages, toward the delivery window, Harry North said, by way of accommodation:

"If you give me a written order, I think I may be able to get your mail for you."

The man in buckskin went on rubbing tobacco between his palms. "No," he said, "you needn't bother. There won't be any mail. Not for me." He filled a corn-husk slip, and rolled himself a cigarette. "I only stick around, watching out for Matt. A body has to look after him a little. Drinks, you understand. Drinks too much. Hard on him if he don't get a letter when he's expecting one. And he drinks."

"What, the little hunchback has a wife? Or is it a sweetheart?"

"Not a wife," said Andy, with smoke straining upward through his yellow moustache. "Nor a sweetheart. No, neither one nor t'other. But, I tell you: it's a school teacher, an old-maid school teacher back in Ohio. You've heard him bragging, maybe, about his affairs with women. Lies. All lies. As if there could be women who would think twice about that misshapen, ugly little runt! Never was a woman, I reckon, who thought twice about him except that Miss—I forget her name—Martin, I believe. Yes, that's it: Amelia Martin. And her letters aren't much. It's only that he's one of her boys. She loves them, her boys. And most of them, I shouldn't wonder, have forgotten her. But he never will. Not Matt. Starts in, days ahead of time, to work himself up. Says there won't be any letter.

Needn't expect it. No, no; not this time. Later on, maybe, but not—and thus and so. And gets drunk, you understand, if the letter doesn't come."

When the wagons passed out of town the hunchback no longer walked beside his oxen. In one of the prairie vans he had been put to bed; and now his heavy vehicle rumbled along as a trailer, behind Big Andy's wagon.

When the prairie vans halted at noon in a green valley two of them were still wet and dripping, for they had risked the quicksand in crossing the wide tributary of the Platte, a river known as the Loup. The other vans had been passed across the stream by means of the rope ferry similar to the one back home, on the Elkhorn.

After their midday meal the men idled in the shade of a wagon, but did not, according to custom, spend this drowsy hour in sleep, because two strangers had "throwed in" with them, as the saying goes. These individuals (one being a person of surly diffidence and the other a fellow of aggressive talkativeness) might spoil the siesta time and be rather a bore, yet were not disdained.

Polite interest the little hunchback tried to take in what was being said: but the drolleries he received as something vastly solemn; he tittered when laughter was untimely, and he smiled at the dullest things, as if they might be enormously entertaining. Sometimes Matt took on a very studious look, as if trying to decide whether this garrulous big fellow were one person only, or twins, or triplets. Even the water bucket, which Arthur had lugged up from the river, seemed to multiply itself. Matt made a

pother in getting hold of the tin cup; he spilled nearly as much water as he conveyed to his dry and unsteady mouth.

"Looks good. Clear and cool," said the talkative stranger when the drinking pail, in going the rounds, had been passed to him. "But no, I guess I won't wet my whistle, not with water that's fetched from one of those little pits scooped out of the sand. Likely to have land seepage in it, impurities of one kind or another, alkali. Roily water of the flowing river is healthier, a whole lot healthier. Pilgrims and bull-whackers, all along the Platte, used to drink from those holes dug in the sand; but my men, when I was wagon-boss, had orders not to drink that kind of water. Too much sickness. Cholera."

"Pretty bad at one time," Big Andy observed, and dipped a brown finger into a dissolving wraith of cigarette smoke. "Cholera . . . yes, pretty bad. Might be that, I shouldn't wonder, would explain a scaly sight we came across one day on Lodgepole Creek. A stranded train, wagon-sheets all whipped to dirty rags in the wind, bows like skeleton ribs. Sixteen wagons corralled. Each tongue holding harness for a four-mule team. Leather brittle-stiff, rusty, curled up like a cast-off shoe on an ash-heap. Nothing in the wagons. Wheels shrunk, tires falling off. What really happened to that outfit I don't know. Never heard." His shoulders shrugged uneasily as he added: "A queer feeling they give a body, such things do. Mighty queer!"

"Teamsters lit out," the voluble stranger observed. "Got panicky, and stampeded. That's it, most

likely—just that. Scairt of cholera, took the stock, and whiffed like bats out o' hell. And I'll eat your shirt if once I didn't have the like of that tried on me. Seems like the graves along the trail, so many new-made graves, had throwed a scare into my outfit. Never did I see a bunch of mule-skinners get to looking so fever-eyed and suspicious. Thought they was ailing, fussed about their victuals, complained of gut-ache. I didn't like the way things were shaping up. Any day I might get left stranded, high and dry. So, of course, the damned nonsense had to be stopped. Wagons weren't going to be left stalled out there on the prairie—not if *I* could help it. Wouldn't do to spoil my freight, or have it lugged off by Indians. If it did spoil, the lads with the outfit could just bet their bottom dollar that a tolerable sight o' corpses was going to spoil, too."

Arthur, as he lay on his stomach chewing a grass blade, did not take his eyes from the square-jawed face of the talker, whose red and bulbous nose revealed a net-work of purple veins. Not until the youngster had been touched a second time on the shoulder did he get up reluctantly, to go away with Doctor North toward the ox-drove grazing near the river.

The stranger continued his narrative. He had opened his shirt in front, and the husky voice seemed to rumble up out of that massive chest of his, all dark with hair like a gorilla. Now and again his wagon-mate cast at him glances not merely of mistrustful scorn but of vindictive malice. It was hate. It was the hate of a subjugated wild beast fearing its

master. Doubtless he had bitterly fallen out with his burly associate.

"When supper fires had been lit," the heavy-jowled man was saying, "I called around to each mess, to have my little say. Had found out who the leaders were. There are always leaders. One of them got some ribs caved in. Another coughed up his front teeth."

That the back of a man, as well as his face, may reveal what is going on in him, could not be better illustrated than by the stiff erectness of Doctor North while he withdrew, with the little boy beside him.

The stranger, meanwhile, paused in his recital and even let a tinge of apology creep into the harsh ruggedness of his voice.

"Not a sweet job. No, it wasn't. But, in a time like that, what's to be done? Can't lay down. *Can* you? Not much! Got to *do* something. Do something showy, just to let folks know who's boss. . . . Once, that night, I felt a wind whizz by in the dark, close to my head. But didn't *sabe*, not at first, what flew past. Stuck in a wagon-box, it did—went *plunk*, and quivered. Somebody had throwed a knife."

"Did, eh?" inquired One-Eyed Mike. "A Mexican?"

"That's it, a greaser." After a pause, the ex-wagon master added: "Mexicans, it seems, have thin skulls. Can't stand much booting in the face. Now if it had been a nigger. . . ."

"Ever notice," the gaunt Missourian interrupted, "that wolves don't care for a Mexican stiff? Not their kind of meat. Might be his flesh is too high

flavoured with the pepper he's et, same as a sage-hen tastes bitter-strong of sage. Fact, anyhow: a greaser carcass will only dry up on the prairie, and not get his bones stripped. Some says it's because a Mexican smokes so many cigarettes and gets hisself too much seasoned with tobac'. But I don't believe that. Don't sound reasonable. . . . Well, and did you fetch your train through all right?"

"I did. No cholera. One death only." Looking at the heavy toes of his scuffed and dusty boots, the talkative stranger added: "Does beat all what a thin skull he had, that knife-slingin' greaser!"

Now it was that the hunchback laboriously announced, as if he were treating the camp to a remarkable piece of news:

"There goes doc. Him and the boy. I see him. It's doc. He's catchin' up his bulls. And what for? Hey, what for?"

"Lay down, Matt," Big Andy admonished. "You better. And get some sleep."

"But it's doc. Ain't it? Sure it is. I see it's doc. And the boy with him."

Something paternal sounded in Andy's voice as he explained:

"That's it: watching out for the little rooster. Our talk is too nightmarish for the little tad. He don't want the boy getting an earful of this gab."

The surly man gave an assenting nod. At the same time his malevolent face shifted expression, his mouth stretching into a grin like a snarling animal.

"Pretty talk, ain't it?" he droned in sulky moroseness. "But that's it—that's what he's like. Wants to tell things scarey. For *my* benefit, that's

why. My skull, you see—*my* skull may be thin, too. There! That's what he's a-drivin' at."

In squinting portentousness the powerful fellow looked at his wagon-mate. "Bawl away," he recommended. "Do it. Snivel, why don't you?"

Hopeful of intervention, bringing his complaint to these men as to a court of public opinion, the surly fellow whined in half-cringing defiance:

"Owns the team and wagon, he does. The barrels of liquor are mine. Share and share alike—that was the agreement. Fifty per cent. he was to get when we sold out. Full barrels when we started. Not a cluck to them. But now what? Uses a gimlet. Sucks out whiskey with a straw or a pipestem. Carries a coffee pot that goes *slush-slush* as he walks along. It's whiskey—*my* whiskey. Thinks I don't *sabe* that, and him half drunk all the while."

Shrugging his powerful shoulders, the other man observed with a tone ominously bland:

"I wouldn't get *too* windy, if I was you. Spoils things, too much chin-music does."

Big Andy rose at once. He got up, gazed sternly down at the strangers, and with magisterial deliberation, without much raising his voice, called to Harry North.

"I say, Doctor, wait a bit. Come back. You and the little shaver better finish your nooning." Giving the quarrelsome partners another coldly judicial stare, he added: "For these other two boys are going to pull their freight. Yes. They're going to pull out. And do it now."

Glum surprise showed in the faces of the whiskey freighters. They remained silent. They exchanged

glances. Finally the surly one observed with a wry grin, which once again disclosed two black snags of his broken teeth:

"Going to roll out, are we? No, we ain't. Not us! Not till we're good and ready."

"The road's open," said Andy. "You're ready."

"Do tell!" muttered the man whose hairy and sunburned chest now warmed to a brighter red. "Maybe," he added, "you *own* this ground."

"You might figure it that way," One-Eyed Mike asserted. "A good salubrious way to figure."

Mart Allen drawled in an offended tone:

"They got liquor. A barrel's tapped. And they don't say, 'Have a drink.' Stingy guts!"

In the broad, hard palm of Andy's hand a silver watch looked strangely small, but seemed to tick with exaggerated loudness.

"Men," he announced, "in fifteen minutes you're going to be on your way. You hear me."

It turned out, however, that the two undesirables were not quite that expeditious. A full twenty minutes had elapsed before their wagon, drawn by two span of oxen, got creakily in motion.

CHAPTER VI

The Sweet-Lipped Messenger

BIG Andy fell a-grumbling. He grumbled confidingly to his oxen; for he could see no sense in a military restriction now being enforced by the post commander at Fort Kearney.

West of that point small wagon-trains were not allowed to go; for it was held unsafe to travel into the Sioux country with a force of less than twenty-five armed men.

"Tomfoolery!" Andy could be heard muttering. "Nothing but tomfoolery."

Alarms, however, had recently spread wide among the settlements. Refugees were moving eastward. Wagonloads of women and children from ranches farther west had been sent to Fort Kearney; other families were travelling to Grand Island, to Columbus, to Fremont, to Omaha.

From day to day rumours multiplied. It was said, but not credited, that only yesterday two cattle-herders on Bijou Creek had been killed in a foray of raiding Sioux. One indisputable fact was known: to-day a guard of soldiers mounted the top of the Overland Mail coach, when the stage set out from Kearney station. West-bound passengers had stopped at that point, deciding to wait there a day or two, or even a week, in the hopes that the supposed

threats of a general uprising might prove groundless. Suspicions, forecasts of trouble had so increased within the last week that wagon masters had been halted by telegrams from their employers. Immigrant trains, likewise, had prudently corralled their wagons rather than brave unnecessary risks.

"Nonsense," Big Andy maintained. "Sheer tomfoolery. That's all it is: it's tomfoolery."

But was it? He, of course, would think so, since he affectionately understood the red men of the plains and did not know how much, in the period of his absence, the Dakota and the Cheyenne had been harried by imbruting mistreatment. Being an adopted tribesman of the Sioux, how could he believe that there would be danger for him in traversing the Indian country?

One night, at the westernmost limit of the territory claimed by the Pawnee, camp had been made at a place separated from the military reservation by a moist-smelling and gray spaciousness—the Platte's sombre expanse of gurgling water. The black-blue darkness rimming the river had been studded, all up and down the valley, by sparks innumerable—fires of the bivouacked army of freighters and immigrants.

Andy and his companions discussed that halted traffic; and in the pauses of their talk they listened to a confusion of sounds drifting far into space from across the river.

Pawnee scouts, a whole battalion of them recently mustered as federal soldiers, had begun to hold some kind of soirée or weird ceremonial. Tom-toms throbbed in deep-toned consonance, and with their

glum pulsing, pulsed likewise the vociferant wildness of a warrior's chant. Owl hootings whimpered, a bull bison roared, and through the night a wildcat ferociously screamed.

"They are good at it," Big Andy observed, "good mimics. It appears that the Pawnee, like nearly all Indians, can imitate every kind of animal cry."

The wagon-company fell silent, the better to listen to the vocal performances of the red men; for it had grown noticeable that the Indians were trying to enlarge their repertory by including the calls of the sentries at the garrison. By and by a soldier announced with intoning solemnity:

"Post Number Five. Ten o'clock. All's well."

And with precisely the same intonation a Pawnee echoed the sentinel:

"Pos' Number Five Cents. Tin ol' rock. Go to hell!"

The Indian seemed proud of his achievement. He had whooped gloriously.

Chuckling appreciation went the rounds of the men about the camp-fire; and Doctor North observed:

"Arthur will surely want to have a look at those scouts. We shall go over there in the morning; for say what you will, I sha'n't want to take the boy with me into the Sioux country. No, he had better be heading for home. I shall send him back by stage."

Next day, accordingly, when North crossed the river, horseback, it was with his juvenile companion behind him. The double mission taking him to the south side of the Platte was to see whether there would be any mail awaiting him at the post-office of the army post, and also to make arrangements

for the return of Arthur to that place of departure, away back yonder, on the Elkhorn River.

Now, for a youngster to have been a freighter, clear to Fort Kearney, and finally to be going back, a stage passenger, all by himself—only fancy the importance of it, the dizzy pinnacle of distinction! An event, an astounding exploit, this memorable homing journey!

Picture his arrival in Tecon City, the bewildering glory of it, his wild scamper up the hill, the strutting first hour of welcome, with eager ears listening to the report of his adventures.

Far more intently than the others, his Aunt Alice, from the very first, was an absorbed listener to everything he had to say. Never, it is certain, had she harkened to the talk of her small nephew with such acute, such particular attention, or with such manifest uneasiness. It was as if she might be saying to herself:

"What next? When is he going to speak of that —that creature?"

Connie also grew uneasy. It was insufferable for him to hear Arthur tell how his fists had been rammed into the wonderfully big muzzles of cannon, on the parade ground at Fort Kearney. The brazen chambers, in sober earnest, were not very big; they were even disappointingly small. So, why not enlarge them?

Arthur did it. He gave the family to understand that those howitzers shot a ball as big as your head. Yes, and bigger!

He also gave the Pawnee scouts a character. No matter that he had really been distressed by their

unsoldierly appearance, he did his best to improve their looks.

Blouses and blue army trousers had been issued to the Indians—also hats. But what does an Indian want with a hat? It may, of course, be an interesting thing to throw in the air; and that is precisely the use the brown battalion had made of their civilized headgear. Whooping and yelling, the Pawnees raced their ponies in a wild charge, and a dark cloud would suddenly rise and go swooping away, helter-skelter, like a whirlwind of delirious black birds. Then came the sport of seeing which rider could scoop up a harvest of hats, to send them sailing again, in another dizzy flight.

As for the Pawnees' dress-parade appearance—hum! Never mind that. Of how dreadfully queer they looked Arthur wouldn't say a word, because he thought it not at all nice for soldiers to cut the seats out of their trousers.

From several of the Pawnee saddles a brace of blue pennants had fluttered out. Trousers, of course! They were trousers used for ornamental effect. Fully half of the troopers, with black hair roached and brown bodies glistening, wore no garment other than a breech-cloth. One had nothing on, nothing at all, except a pair of brass spurs.

Upon his arrival home Arthur had not wanted to be kissed by Florence. That sort of attention, even from Dockey North, had seemed improper. All the more so, because Matt, the hunchback, had seen the farewell kissing. Arthur did not want to remember that one kiss had been for himself, and that another had been given him to take to his Aunt Alice. The

little boy did not mean to give it her—not ever. For he wished to think of Dockey North as of one who does not go in for such foolishness as kissing.

It was not easy, all the same, to keep from giving her what his man-comrade had sent. Especially not easy, because Dockey had said: "You won't forget, will you?" Arthur, with a hasty mumble, had promised not to forget.

Nor had he forgotten. There was the trouble. He wished he *could* forget. This hopeless remembering was almost as sad a blow to his manhood as the necessity of wearing a nightie again, or the obligation of saying his prayers.

To all that Arthur told about his wonderful adventures Alice had been listening with specialized interest. For any moment, now, he might begin to speak of that prairie girl. As yet he had not mentioned her, and next day it was the same: he talked and talked, but at no time was there any reference to Winifred Barton. Could it be possible, then, that her unexplained disappearance from Tecon City had no relation to the going away of Doctor North? All the same, she was the sort of person capable of running after a man. Quite capable of it!

Had she, perhaps, identified herself with the wagon-train which Arthur had been describing? Ever since the departure of Doctor North this suspicion would not down. It kept on throbbing with singular pertinacity in the mind of Alice Arden. Hers was a distressed feeling that sooner or later something of alarming significance must surely turn up in the talk of her little nephew. And seeing that nothing did turn up, Aunt Al repressed her tantalizing inquisi-

tiveness. It would be ignoble, she thought, to ask questions; it would be all of a piece with listening at key-holes.

Now and again Florence criticized her brother's big stories, calling attention to their discrepancies, their essential falsity; but Aunt Alice, understanding the imaginative vigour of childhood, admonished her niece not to interrupt.

Always, after one of his sister's disapproving comments, the traveller would adhere more strictly to matters authentic, only dressing them up a little with fanciful and spectacular trimmings.

In all that he said there had been no word, not a syllable about the song, the mysterious singing of the plains, nor of the sweet tinkling of the guitar played one night in the wagon-camp. Neither would Arthur be likely to remember such trivialities.

Finally his aunt, being always at grips with a painful possibility, could no longer resist the impulse ever tugging at her. Let it be a low trick or not; let it be prying and spying or what you will, she made inquiries. Taking on an unnatural look, she asked questions. Had Arthur, by any chance, seen something of Miss—Miss—what's-her-name?

Since the little boy could only look puzzled over this unilluminating question, Alice at once explained herself. With a smile of face-stiffening artificiality she added, moistening her lips:

"I mean the young lady whose father—was so unfortunate—— He died. Heart failure. Barton is the name. That's it, Barton. I don't suppose, Arthur, that you saw anything of Miss Barton, did you—while you were gone?"

"See her? Why, no, Aunt Al. How could I?"

It struck him as an odd, as a very absurd idea; and although he did not notice anything singular in his aunt's expression, the sharp eyes of Florence took in the heightened colour, the ungovernable reddening warmth which brightened the young woman's cheeks and forehead and throat, and then died out, leaving only a strange pallor.

"Miss Barton? No," said Arthur. "What makes you ask?"

"Why, I thought that perhaps—— But you didn't? Of course you wouldn't—— How well you look! It has agreed with you, this journey. And how many interesting things you saw!"

They might be that; but she was no longer absorbed in the little boy's tremendous romancing. She even seemed to grow absent-minded. For heigho, poor Alice Arden! Once she had found out what she wanted to know, she was no better pleased than if she had remained in ignorance.

For what had been the lure of the trail for Harry North? What might it signify, this needless, dangerous, wrong-headed enterprise of his? Was it the old sorrow that had made him restless? Had remorse strangled love? Must the plague-spot go on gnawing his soul forever?

In times past she had been indignant over her lover's treatment of her. But here, finally, there was no self-interest. She was grieving for his lost happiness.

One evening, after Arthur had gone rebelliously to bed, in a nightie, he lay awake a long while. He listened to the regular and even breathing of his

sister and brother, both sound asleep. He also listened to the squeak of the needle as it was drawn through some cloth by his Aunt Alice. With head bent over her work, she was sewing by the table, in the light of two candles.

By and by the little boy raised himself up, and looked. Her head had sunk forward; inclining so near to the flames that Arthur wondered whether the coppery ringlets would not presently catch fire. He noted, too, that her thimble no longer glinted. Her still hands lay deep sunk in the sag of her skirt. She did not move when he crept stealthily out of bed. Neither did she stir when his bare feet went pat-patting across the floor.

He went up to her. He impulsively flung his arms about her neck, giving her the very biggest hug he knew how to give. She felt his breath upon her cheek, the sweet, warm breath of childhood; and next she felt his red mouth pressed against hers in a kiss of special tenderness.

"From him, it's from him," the little boy blurted out, and ran back to bed. But he could not understand why, all at once, his Aunt Alice should fall a-crying with gasping breaths and hard sobs, exactly like a child.

PART VI

NIGHT

CHAPTER I

The Loves of Men

ON THE day when Arthur started home Big Andy had been very impatient to enlist the required force of armed men, and so had been trying persuasion on the cautious immigrants, in the hope that some of the wagons, at least, might brave the risks of traversing the upper reaches of the valley, through the country claimed by the Ogalalla Sioux.

Doctor North and Matt returned, meanwhile, from the Fort Kearney side of the river; and although the hunchback had not visited the notorious village south of the army post, the Dobe Town of obscene rascalities and atrocious whiskey; although, in truth, he had drunk not a drop, he was giddy, all the same—quite giddy, actually intoxicated with elation. He had received a letter. He pretended to have received other letters also; and he talked of them, he wanted it understood that they were amatory epistles wonderfully ardent. Even when Big Andy, coming back from the other wagon-camps, began to discuss the outlook for further travel, Matt could hardly listen to anything that was said.

"It's Doug, right enough—Doug Davis," the yellow-haired man announced. "A twelve-wagon outfit; blasting powder for the mines. Suits him to organize a train with us, and he won't be caring a

particular cuss who gets elected wagon-boss. All he wants is to be pushing on. That's it. That's how it stands. So what we got to do is to elect Doc North."

Coming out of a brown study, upon hearing his name spoken, North made the surprised inquiry:

"Elect? Who is it you want to elect?"

"Not the skull-buster, Dobe Dan," Allen asserted. "A cinch we won't stand for him being captain. But he's pulled in, with his whiskey wagon, and he's after the job."

Much to the chagrin of that burly candidate election did indeed fall upon North; and seeing that preferment had come to him in terms of assured confidence, one might suppose that he would feel mildly elated. He might certainly have had some zest for the honour, if only he could have brought himself to regard it as a thing pleasing to Alice Arden.

A letter from her, newly received, the young man re-read with a view to discovering some of the old sweetheart extravagances which, in former days, had made his blood beat fast. She still esteemed him; he had no doubt of that. But what, after all, if it were only a disciplined self-respect which had been keeping her staunchly loyal?

The great trouble with him, as with all men who disparage themselves, was his mistrust of others' good opinion. Her presence hovered before him. He would like to think that the passion of her heart could never be for any one else; and yet the skepticism of his own hurt soul denied to him the faith which once had been so compellingly his.

"I wonder," he said, furtively putting the letter

away, when Big Andy came to talk with him; "I wonder whether you have ever felt that you were no good." North began to examine a roster of the wagon company whereon were listed the names, the kind and amount of freight, the ages of the children in the immigrant contingent, and the number of defensive weapons available. "Have you felt," he went on, "that your life had somehow got into a hopeless mess and muddle? But no; don't answer. None of my business."

The sunset gun of Fort Kearney spread its booming echoes far down the river before the plainsman asserted in a tone mildly critical:

"You despise yourself. And I, of course, know what that is; I know, I know exactly what that is. For I, too—— But I'm feeling better, now that we're organized and fixed to move out of this. Want to get to my family.

"You know what things I have in my wagon; but you don't know what they're meant for. Presents —that's it—presents, little gifts of one kind and another. Useful things, too: blankets, shawls, axes, kettles, cloth. For Singing Thrush, you understand —for her, my wife, and my wife's people."

A pleased, proud look had come into the blue eyes of the yellow-haired man; he went on talking with a tone gruffly tender:

"When I give out these things, her relatives will be pleased; they'll be pleased, of course—but not so very grateful. For gift-giving, among the Dakota people, is, you see, very common; it's the rule of life. Among the Indians I have not known a greedy man. Not one. There are no poor. Old people who get

past their usefulness are not neglected, but held in respect and taken care of. My wife, when she takes the store of wild beans which the field mice gather, wouldn't be mean enough to rob them; she gives them corn in return for the beans she takes away——"

Andy was silent awhile, before he thoughtfully repeated:

"Good hearts—nice ways, if you come to understand them."

Even though North, hearing this, might not be in a humour to listen well, he could not miss being astonished and touched that this uncouth fellow should talk of the tribespeople with such feeling and fineness of appreciation. One might almost be moved to discuss, with such a man, a vexing secret of the heart; but any impulse Harry North may have had to do so had soon been quenched, owing to the grotesque display which Matt, the hunchback, was making of the letter he had brought back from the Kearney post-office.

This squat individual, with a head abnormally large and set neckless between hunched shoulders, had found it impossible to keep from bragging once more about his amazing good fortune. Behold this letter! Everybody was to observe his wonderful letter. He called to Andy and to North; they were to come and hear certain choice passages of it.

Seated on the ground between Mike and Allen, the queer fellow flourished the written pages; he waved them, he smiled, he took on a smart, conceited look. Love letters, he made out, were nothing new for him. You were to believe that he received them often.

From Rose, for instance. He mentioned Rose in particular. Ah, that Rose! Adorable creature!

"Rose, eh?" said Mike. "Is she the same as Myrtle?"

"No, Myrtle is—— They're not the same."

"That so? Well, now, I had an idea that Rose and Myrtle and Sary and Sal and Mehitable were all the same party."

"Drop it!" Matt demanded. "Quit your funning." And he went on talking about her, that adorable Rose. "Such dark hair, such eyes! Not tame, neither, but gay and giddy. Likes to show her ankles. Now Violet, on the other hand, she's different. Altogether different. Not so lively, sort of haughty, a lot of style to her. And all right! Bet your life she is. A damnation fine gal! Full of virtuousness.

"She's a blonde," Matt asserted, "that's what Violet is, a blonde. And good looks? Oh, I say, a beauty, the finest a body ever laid eyes on! They don't make blondes any more peaches-and-creamier than what Violet is!"

Big Andy looked away, cleared his throat, grew ashamed, and presently said:

"Why tell lies? Who's going to believe you? What's it for?"

"Folks don't have to believe me," Matt brazenly retorted. "I don't care whether they do or don't believe me. It's so, anyhow, every word."

Smiling and happy, he went on reading the letter from that someone of motherly heart, from that friend of his boyhood, the old-maid school teacher, the one woman in all the world who had ever both-

ered to write him any letters. Doubtless she never knew what they meant to him. It is quite as well, perhaps, that she was never to know what amazing and outrageous romances he had built upon them. And yet, when the need for writing them would presently be past, it might be good for her to know how gracious a thing her kindness had been to him!

This, the last letter he was ever to receive, would one day be found wofully crumpled in his hand, while he lay all huddled together, in a buffalo wallow, with his cartridges utterly shot away, and an Indian arrow through his heart.

CHAPTER II

Indian Country

RAIN had fallen in the night. Now the dust of the trail lay speckled and pitted into dark dimplings left by one of those hard-pelting storms, quick to come and pass. Deliciously the day had dawned, with air washed clean, a world all fragrant with verdant spaciousness. A keen prairie odour had especially been released by the moisture from bushy gray-green clumps of the wild sage.

By the tread of bright tires, slowly rolling at the head of the column, the rain-pricked dust was being ironed smoothly into streaks. Wet wagons shone in the sun, drenched canvas sagged, and gilded shower drops fell away, now and again, in a little topaz glitter of brilliant sparks.

The caravan had changed the customary method of travel. Instead of stretching out in a careless defile, this was by no means a straggling procession. Unnecessary gaps would not be permitted. An emphatic order had been issued on this point, and was being obeyed with strict exactitude.

After the organized train set out, a feeling rather out of the ordinary manifested itself; for this, finally, was the beginning of the danger zone—Indian country. Every minute of the time people kept thinking of that. Not that they expected anything

to happen. Nothing, of course, *would* happen. Certainly not! And yet the lumbering procession continued its journey with a ponderous gravity hardly less solemn than a funeral cortège.

Letters had been written to friends and relatives, back yonder in the States. Belts sagged heavily with cartridges. In the wagons loaded rifles had been put in places convenient to reach. But before the hour of noonday rest at last arrived, what a weighty and thumping encumbrance the heavy six-shooters had come to be!

By and by, as apprehension thinned away, the teamsters began to banter one another, to joke about their "hip-howitzers" and even about the dread commonly shared. When a man called Hair-Minus Hicks used a shirt-sleeve to wipe his perspiring baldness, an ox-driver lustily called out:

"Why don't you dress your head more respectable, and not try to cheat the scalp-histers?"

A thickset and heavy individual shouted to a lank Missourian called Toothpick Tom:

"You ought to be tol'able safe, I reckon, from gettin' pegged by an Injun arrow. And gosh-all fish-hooks! I wisht I was built like a ramrod, same as you!"

Despite the grisly note of these jests, they roused a sort of derisive merriment. Men laughed, and it was not forced laughter. For consider that out of the thousands of wagon-trains passing up and down this valley of the Platte, not many of them, relatively very few of them, had been assailed by raiding bands of Sioux.

This outfit, likewise, would have no trouble.

Others might; not this! The heavens, dreaming their blue dream in magical serenity, seemed to give blessed assurance that nothing *could* happen.

In mid-afternoon the train master rode back to the plodding column after selecting a place with good grass and water, suitable for the night camp. Afterward he cantered along, appearing now on one side of the wagon-train, now on the other, but in a manner so casual and unofficious as scarce to suggest that he might be the caravan's commander. Quiet, meagre of speech, apparently detached, he seemed quite unobservant; but already the wagon company had acquired an awed confidence that he saw everything, knew everything, felt every pulse-beat of life in the whole procession of twenty-six wagons.

Once, while passing Doug Davis, the train's second in command, North said with bland incisiveness:

"One of your teamsters, at three minutes past ten, lit his pipe and dropped the match, still burning. Not the thing, Doug. You will tell Shag Miller it is not the thing."

"With the grass getting so dry, bull-whackers ought to know enough," Davis conceded, "to pinch a match or spit on it before throwing it down."

"They ought," North agreed. "Another thing," he went on, "hereafter the men of your outfit will not light their mess fires so near the wagons. Blasting powder being what it is, they will be doing well, you know, to remember that it is not twelve loads of building sand."

At the foot of the train North passed the driver of the *cavayado*, the drove of freighters' work cattle

combined with immigrant milch cows, which kept moving along behind the rear wagons. Where the smirching clouds fumed up most densely, with an alkaline irritation of eyes and throat, some of the men wore goggles. The herd-boy, so Doctor North observed as he rode by, not only protected his vision with green glass, but wore a dampened sponge tied under his nostrils. When given genial greeting by the train master, the youth did not answer but diffidently nodded, then exerted himself unduly by prodding a lazy ox with his *carajo* pole.

The agile and feline grace of the lad, with his red silk neckerchief carelessly knotted, and the brim of his sombrero turned down, left with North a picturesque and pleasing impression, but one which rather piqued his curiosity. He even had the notion that the driver of loose cattle, for some reason inexplicable, had purposely avoided speaking to him.

Merely a fancy, perhaps—a passing, idle fancy! But after nightfall, when he called at the wagon where Mrs. Ross was busy with her camp arrangements, he said to her, with a manner rather studiously casual:

"Am I wrong in thinking that the boy who often drives the *cavayado* is a messmate with you and Judge Ross?"

The woman answered in a guarded tone:

"Yes, he camps with us."

Saying so, she grew suddenly voluble, talking of other matters.

"I have seen the lad on a good saddler," North observed, refusing to have the conversation diverted. "Not your horse, is it?"

"'You are not going to shirk, you contemptible braggart, you are going to do your full share.'"

Not to be
taken away

With a swift flutter of her dress she sped from him as if in dread lest the contents of the black kettle might have boiled dry and begun to scorch. A pretext? Could it be a mere pretext for not wanting to discuss his question?

However much Harry North may have cared to pursue his inquiries regarding the horse and rider, and whether the herd-boy was one to sing songs and perhaps play the guitar of an evening, the time for acquiring such information must, apparently, be put off until some hour more opportune. For now, as it chanced, official demands cut short his investigation.

Someone, smirchily revealed in the darkness, had said:

"Hey, boss; that you?"

Recognizing the voice of the assistant wagon master, North replied:

"Well, Doug, what's up? Want me?"

"Don't know as I do. Just wanted to report that three men are night-herding for the first watch."

"Three? But there should be four."

"You said so—yes; and there's the hitch. Number Four wants to see the colour of the man's hair that's going to make him do herd duty."

"What have you done?"

"Ordered him out; that's all—so far. Thought I better ask first, before getting a hole shovelled to plant him in."

"Quite right," said North; and lifting his hat to Mrs. Ross as he departed, he went away with his assistant into the thickening darkness, now brightly studded at intervals by camp-fires vividly glowing.

"It's the defeated candidate," said Doug. "The skull-smasher, the Right Honourable Dobe Dan."

"So?—See that shooting star? A bright one.—On the prod, is he? Wants to horn somebody?—Often a star like that is mistaken for an Indian fire-arrow. A lot of talk about fire-arrows, but Andy says there's nothing in it. Smoke-signals, certainly; but as for the flaming shaft, it's something he never saw used except once. And that, he says, was to scare some wild animal out of a tree."

Having crossed the inner space of the wagon-corral, North and his companion now advanced upon their objective point, a fire where loud talk of men combined with the sound of bacon greasily a-sputter in a camp skillet. A teamster with his face yellowed by the flames had a strained and squinting look, as with a concentrated effort to distinguish who might be approaching. But the burning brightness, with its halo, had doubtless made difficult the task of seeing far beyond the radius of illumination; for in peering across a camp-fire the contrasting darkness is always sure to appear black as a hole.

He was seen to nudge a neighbour. Others listened, the frying pan was lifted from the coals, the noisy babble and sputtering died out. A single voice, however, kept up a raucous syllabification. The talker got cumbrously to his feet, the whole massive front of him turning russet in the fire-glow.

"Want me to shut up, do you? Mustn't talk!" He gruffly laughed in the harshness of his scorn. "What you scairt about? Scairt somebody's going to hear me?"

Someone cautioned in a low voice:

"Drop it, Dan. You better!"

He laughed again. With his menacing bulk towering over them he looked down from above the fire as if trying to discover what sort of human insects they were, those half-dozen messmates of his. "Must have worms, the way you're acting!" he asserted, with bullying aggressiveness, while the others, with faces turned from the light, sat mute, gazing into the darkness, ever striving to descry the moving shapes whose martial tread did not turn aside but steadfastly advanced.

"Scairt," he repeated. "Got cold feet. That's the kind of junipers you are. And see what you've got for it. See what kind of tenderfoot you've got for wagon-boss. Must have four men on night-herd. Why four? Yellow! That's why. Two's enough; but he. . . . Yellow, he's yellow. Got to have four men. Shaking in his boots."

His challenging sneers abruptly ended. Two men strode into the encircled radiance cast by the fire.

"Don't mind us," the slighter of them observed with insinuating quietness. "Go right ahead. Let's hear the rest of this, by all means. You were saying. . . ."

Raspingly Dobe Dan cleared his throat, and held still while the fireshine glinted in his glowering, bloodshot eyes. But he did not speak. He seemed to have emptied himself of words.

Doug Davis coughed. A man by the fire moved uncomfortably. The wagon master said:

"Sit where you are. Don't any of you get up. You have listened to—ah—to this oration. You will also listen to me. Believe it, or not, this train

is going through to Denver. You are going to help it through, every mother's son of you. If I say, 'Stand guard,' you're going to stand guard. There will be no shirks." He paused, his voice gaining incisiveness as he added: "You will do your work, or I'm going to know the reason why. The sort of caterwauling that's been heard here is going to stop."

A teamster spat decorously to one side. Another drew his belt tighter, dug a boot-heel into the ground, and thickly mumbled:

"Yes, Cap. All right, Cap. But it ain't *us* that's been a-blowing off."

"Not? But you listen, all the same. Like to hear it. Find it amusing. . . . As for this bloat-belly, who thinks he's going to run things, I know about him. Has been making his brag that I won't see Pike's Peak. Won't I, though? Why won't I?"

An alert stride brought North close to the broad-chested individual bulking head and shoulders above him. The commander's right foot, deftly swinging as he moved, knocked a tin coffee pot into a bumping flight of clanking somersaults. Some of the contents darkly splashed the dusty boots of Dobe Dan, so that from them and from the ground all about him a strong smell of spilt whiskey sharply whiffed into space.

Surprised and winking, unable for the moment to comprehend what had happened, the stalwart fellow of heroic mould sniffed the alcoholic odour rising in keen fumes from his dripping boots. Then a snorting grunt came from him.

"You!" he bellowed, with a mighty heave of his capacious chest, "you skunk!"

His arm doubled back, a powerful arm terminating in a hulking paw now grimly lumped into knuckly bronze. The heavy fist ponderably swung; it swung —hung poised, and swung again, strangely delaying its stroke of stone-crushing capability.

Why pause? Why should eyes red-rimmed with vindictive rage be held captive by the gray gaze of eyes bleakly peering? And how should the wagon master, looking nowhere but into the inflamed ferocity of those bloodshot eyes, understand also what was passing outside his range of vision. He even spoke to his assistant:

"Steady, Doug. Keep your hand off that gun."

Nothing was heard for a time save the choked and wheezy pantings of the bull-necked Dobe Dan. Then, the moments of crisis still holding, the men about the fire uneasily stirred as with the impulse of self-preservation, to get out of the way.

"Sit still," North commanded.

They sat still. Two turned their faces aside. One smiled knowingly—smiled, for a shrewd perception was his that the wagon master would need no assistance and no weapon for the subjugation of this menacing bully. The better to observe how it was to end, the watcher held up a hand to shade his face from the firelight, noting at once that the steely look had gone out of the chief's eyes. Now they shone with a strange brightness. The gleam of scorn had come into them, the cold gleam of an immense scorn austerely concentrated. With deadly quietness North was saying:

"You are not going to shirk, you contemptible braggart. You will do your share of night-herd duty,

the same as any man in this outfit. Now, to-night, you are going to do it. Right away!"

"I will, eh?"

"You will."

Sobered and still, shamefaced, humiliated before his messmates, Dan gave his bulky shoulders a shambling shrug. "Herd-duty—sure," he glumly conceded. "Do my shift." Who knows but what it had been borne in upon him, with the clearing of his faculties, how in the better years of his life—years of decision and unbefuddled capability, before besotted flabbiness begun—that he, too, as a wagon master, had faced more than one situation similar to this? And who knows but what the rags of decency, which may cling to a man even in his brutish state, had not more influenced him to knuckle under than the commander's force of will?

"Do my shift," he repeated, and began backing away, unhurriedly withdrawing, taking plenty of time, as if extreme deliberation might, somehow, help a little to save his face.

So retreating, he had gone but a few steps when he seemed to dissolve into the night, being absorbed by the black reaches of darkness beyond the fire. But mutterings, harshly and raggedly articulate, kept coming back from the void:

"All right. . . . Do my shift. . . . I will. But just wait: he ain't through with me. He's going to squawk, right enough. He is . . . before I get done with him."

CHAPTER III

Smoke

BESIDE Big Andy walked one of the immigrant children, a little girl wearing a blue sunbonnet; for, when in the right mood, he would sometimes relate Dakota wonder stories, the beautiful legends about the stars or the animal people, those charming Indian fancies so richly stored up in his memory. To-day, however, he did not speak of such things.

He had begun to gaze with narrowed eyes into the sun-glare of late afternoon, with the circular solitude of the northwest particularly drawing his attention. He adjusted his hat-brim, he halted, he studiously peered, giving to that thin-girdling edge of the world, now faintly violet as always, a concentrated scrutiny. For why should the horizon's unattainable frontier seem vaguely to shiver? An illusion, perhaps; one of those astounding freaks of the sun's refracted light.

All at once he said:

"That's good. First rate." Something new had come into his voice, something brisk and spirited instead of the mild and rather prosaic droning with which he usually spoke.

"What's good?" the little girl inquired.

Big Andy did not reply. He watched the slant of

dust as it smoked up from hoofs and wheels, to go scudding away in powdering whiffs from the road; and as puffs of breeze came running over the plains, in eccentric gusts of sultriness, he noted with keen interest the jerky whiskings of sun-bleached grass.

"From the southwest. Good, that's good. First rate. If only the wind don't go to whipping 'round," he went on, "we're in the clear."

He snapped his whip toward the reach of sky-line which now and again appeared to quiver obscurely, to be crawling away, pursued by these fitful spurts of fevered wind. Curious phenomenon! What in the world could it be? The little girl noticed that the horizon had not only widened, but had changed colour, shifting from cool violet to a warm and lilac hue.

"Queer!" she exclaimed. It surely was—and remarkable, too; for metallic glints, sharp twitches, veinings of brass, pricked with running flickers into the gray-lilac arc delicately widening.

Big Andy said:

"Hark, the wagon-boss!"

Down the long procession Doctor North came cantering, steadily, unhurriedly, and speaking as he came. One heard his voice, but for a time he still remained too far away for words to be understood. This must be an announcement of some sort. He was making it quietly, deliberately, without much raising his voice.

"Boost along, men. Brisk up as well as you can. A half hour or so should bring us to a marsh. Have grain sacks and water buckets ready."

Farther down the rank of teams Doug Davis had taken up the order, repeating it with a tone more brusque and vibrant:

"Lively. Prod up. Shove 'em along. We corral at the slough."

The commander, drawing nearer, was heard to say:

"Safe enough, while the wind holds where it is. Be ready, everybody, with grain sacks and water buckets."

Nearer and more aggressively loud, the assistant wagon master kept asserting:

"Cool heads and quick work is what we want when we get there. We back-fire. Need grain sacks and water buckets."

The little girl sped away to the wagon of her parents. Whips cracked. Teamsters yelled. Scurries of dust continuously swished up more densely from the trail, while to the west, and north of west, the vague long line of dainty lavender kept warming more and more, until by and by it appeared to steam mildly like thawing frost. Metal filings—copper, brass, and gold—seemed to be stippled into that zone thinly moving and stretching. Feeble yellow eyes winked there. Minute marblings of flame would shake in laced loveliness all the way along—would pulse, shiver, palely dart and glimmer.

Perhaps the pretty trail, faintly fuming, would not advance this way. With the going down of the sun perhaps these panting puffs of wind would likewise dwindle and die. Would they? Men hoped so. Women prayed that they might.

Tin milk pails appeared, wooden buckets came forth from the wagons. Match boxes were being

passed from one teamster to another, in preparation for the work needing to be done.

Ox-teams walked fast, attended by cries resonant and shrill, by gruff yells, by vigorous fusilades of snapping whips. From time to time the wagon master reined in his horse, the better to study the distance.

"Christ!" someone muttered. "She's snuffin' 'round, and pullin' stronger."

"Not so bad—not so bad!" Big Andy declared, and optimistically added: "Nothing to hurt, if only the wind don't work more to the north."

"But it is!" the hunchback asserted, and cast an accusing look at his comrade. "It is," he insisted. "Can't you *smell* that it is?"

He was right. Hot air, acridly tainted, came puffing by; sudden bursts of wind carried with them a sharp, strong odour of scorching.

Then the sun went strange. Having lost its wide, white, amazing stare, it now had grown weird—a shrunken, spectral sun, bleared and blood-red.

"Smoke's thickening up," said Andy. "It is, Matt; it is for a fact."

CHAPTER IV

Fire

AT THE clamour of approaching wagons three snipe took wing from the marsh, flying away with melancholy cries. Nothing sounded from the spacious puddle save the swishy rasp of bleached grasses scuffling in the wind, while in the dirty water the bloodshot sun burned scarlet, a veiled inflammation, rayless and sanguinary. From glossy mud round about this fetid slough which lay platter-shaped, fifty yards in breadth and greenishly blotched, rose saline odours of ooze and alkali, a sick exhalation of brackish staleness and stagnation.

Once the loose drove and the yoke-cattle had been stoutly penned up within the circumference of the empounding wagons, a full score of teamsters deployed to the northwest. Fleetly skirting the marsh, they stretched out from the head of the miry pond in a loose skirmish line; and here each man of them lit a fire in the sere shagginess. Through the tindery vegetation a wide girdle must be burned; an expansive avenue of smoking stubble must stop the leap of flame-billows, which, being still remote, appeared not so much to sweep hitherward as to creep and lazily crawl.

Little blue-gray smudges, one after another, began to spurt aslant, away from the feet of the men

lighting fires. A bucket brigade—boys, girls, and women—helped to serve the flame-kindlers. With muddy water hurried from the slough the flapping grain sacks must be kept wet, so that whenever the small gusts of flame tried to run wild, they could be rigorously whipped out.

The wind, fortunately, did not blow with steadiness. Strongly it blew, but in gusty suspirations, heaving and dying, a lull after each scorched and wheezing sigh.

Once, despite the alert energy of a water-soaked extinguisher, a hissing crackle spurted wide. Two men whipped at it. A third ran to their assistance. One gasped in teeth-gritting anxiety:

"Smash it! Stop it! God a'mighty, boys, she's getting away from us!"

A smoke-choked throat grunted with a cough: "Don't stew! Keep your shirt on."

It could be seen that the wagon master had made preparation against just such an emergency as this. With vigilant promptitude Doctor North, on his horse, came swiftly a-gallop, and dragging something as he came. It was something roped to his saddle-horn—the quarter of an ox freshly killed. This bulky thing, heavily scraping along, made shift to crush the bursting billow of spreading flames.

The labour continued. Strangling coughs were heard. With the sacks vehemently flapping, the workers were like grotesque birds ineffectually trying to fly away. One man, with a spark in his eye, flung up his arms, floundered about in a queer, scarecrow dance, and once more disappeared in the fog and tumbling surf of smoke.

Alert, quiet, giving few orders, the commander watched the result of the back-firing activities. With the slapping furnace heat in his face, he also watched the far-flung vapour-trail enormously spreading, mightily advancing, ever charging with a swifter rush.

Flecks of yellow increased. Bursts of fire-foam spouted up. Breakers of the mighty burning, beyond the thickest tide of tumbling smoke, kept bounding spectacularly into froths of sheeting flame.

Grimly North scrutinized the scorching squalls, the hurling bounds of smoke and fire. What of the powder-wagons? Could the multiplying velocity of wind cast flaming weeds across the muddy barrier of marsh? Could buffalo dung, spinning disks of flame, ride the gale so far that a storm of live embers would go hailing down upon the canvas tops? Could such a thing happen?

Yes, North thought, and went dizzy, grew nauseously sick with the futility of plans and care and tactical preparation. But there must still be something to do. Wasn't there? Something as yet left undone; some last, hopeful, momentous chance! If only the affrighted cattle in the wagon-corral would stop their clamour of mooing, and let him think! From the restless milling of hoofs inside the pen vast dust-blurs kept merging with the blurs of smoke. Dry, dirty billows rose and rose, ever smirching up over the wagon tops which seemed to hang yonder, above the ground, like a dim argosy of fat, gray-bellying clouds.

The animal bellowing increased; it swelled to a diapason, to a tumult of roaring terror, the panic lunacy of animal hopelessness.

"Poor beasts!" North mused, as he was jerked about by the nervous jumps and leaps of his horse. "There's no telling how near they are to being stunned, smashed, utterly wiped out!"

As quick as the flicker of this dread, an apparition short and gray, someone with a splashing water bucket, had sprung up beside his stirrup.

"Hey, there, who's that?" North challenged, peering down with smarting eyes. "You, Laura? Listen, then. Keep away from the wagons. Understand? Don't go near. Don't let other children go near."

Toppling and high, a bulging cliff of smoke had come swelling overhead, with swirls of fiery butterflies dancing there, a prodigious storm of them frantically seething and streaming in the wind. The murky turmoil of this dry tidal wave quite blotted out the sun. Darkness shut down. At the same moment the little girl suddenly felt herself caught up from the ground. How? By what? She did not know until she grew aware of being astride of a horse, in front of the wagon master.

Then, penetrating and clear above the hot crackle, his voice cut into the plunging welters of smoke:

"Quit, men! Enough! All out! Back to the marsh!"

Again and again, as he rode along, he repeated the command. Running shadows answered the order, abruptly wagging into view and dissolving. One of these phantom shapes remained beside the horse, and gripping a cantle-string, gulped for breath.

North said:

"Hullo, Andy. That you?"

Twice clearing his dry throat, the big fellow gasped:

"It ought to do. Acres burnt over. Big blaze can't jump that, I reckon."

Into the choking fumes the wagon master shouted:

"But the marsh, if it were twice as wide——"

"What?" Andy yelled. "Oh, the slough. It's O. K. All burnt off on the west side."

Something ahead of the horse abruptly smirched past, something hardly more definable in shape than a hodful of ashes dumped into the wind. "See that?" Andy called out, and waggled the foot of the little girl. "Antelope. Streaking it, eh? For dear life!" Breathing hard in the smoke and in the charred dust rising from the stubbly ground, he hoarsely added: "Awhile back a jackrabbit hit me. Most knocked me down." He began to bemoan the fate of little prairie animals. "Tough on them, mighty tough. Birds, too, will be killed—ground birds—lots of them. The young in their nests."

Crushed by the gale, his talk had flattened to a thin vocalization, with only ragged snatches of it to be clearly understood. The little girl wanted to know how the fire got started; but he couldn't tell. "Nobody can," he said. "A spark from a pipe could do it, or a careless coal left by pilgrims; or it could be, maybe, spite work of Indians."

"Andy! Hey, there!" the wagon master called, leaning sidewise to make himself heard.

"What?"

"Take Laura. Round up the other children and the women. Keep them on the burnt ground, away from the wagons."

From under the little girl, as she was lifted, the horse seemed to float away, dissolving with the suddenness of the wild animals speeding by. Dun vapours did not lift. Fleeting smothers of them ran into a darkness so blind that North could only find his way toward the wagons by the roar, the tornado of bellowings from the corral.

Though the haze had thickened to opaque density, it seemed to him that the colossal waves of panting heat no longer held the blistering menace of awhile ago. It might even be, he thought, that the stupendous wash of flames had already struck the blackened areas of back-firing, and there had stopped with this enormous smoke-heave of choking sombreness.

Night fell. A night of snowing ashes, of gray darkness going black with a suffocating blackness. Sparks danced in it, witch-eyes rode the gale, a whirl and glitter of burning weeds streaked the gloom, and all the while the spun torches of the buffalo chips kept splashing the murk with the red trail of their passing. Momentarily the gray wagon tops, here one and there one, blushed under these wind-hurled rockets, flushing warm with a brief and fugitive glow.

All at once a wagon-sheet caught fire. Screaming blasphemy from someone buried in darkness bespoke disaster. Flames had spurted up. By a malicious freak of destiny, the peril had overshot the wagons fronting westerly, and had sought for its mark one of the vans farthest removed from danger—one of the twelve carefully set in that part of the circle where (as it had been supposed) the shower of flame-flakes would be least likely to fall.

"Hell!" someone shrieked. "A powder wagon!"

North struck spurs to his horse, charging in a desperate burst of speed toward the blaze luridly spouting.

"It won't explode," he told himself. "And if it does?" He wondered what the force of it would be—up or down? This inconsequential point held his thoughts. He puzzled about it. What a great stupid, not to know what direction the shock would take!

Other thoughts mixed with this worried concern. He had torn up the letter received from Alice. But why? A good letter, a very good letter. He wanted to read it again. There might be phrases in it that he hadn't understood. Hidden meanings would be clearly revealed, if only he might—— She didn't love Victor. She couldn't. But if she did—ah, well, good old Vic!

North plunged from his horse. He jumped, and sped forward, whipping out his bowie knife as he ran; and as the swift blade went slitting the canvas, a voice on the other side of the wagon began to shout. It seemed to him that he ought to know who it was, that invisible person of contralto utterance who kept calling out:

"Cut away! Cut, cut! Slash 'er loose!"

The sheeted blaze began to lift. Up it soared like a kite; it flapped, folded, swirled into the wind, a fiery fleece shorn from naked wagon-ribs.

"Water!" shrilled the wild voice from the other side of the ponderous van. "Douse water! Douse it, douse it!"

Still North wondered who that could be. The herd-boy, perhaps. Was it?

Near the wagon master something whisked from hub to tire, from wheel up the stout-ribbed wall. A shadow-shape like a bear agilely swung, mounted, grotesquely hoisted itself over the rim and out of sight.

North likewise made shift to scale the gloomy side of the black hulk, and as he did so he heard a hissing splash of water.

"Got it?" he asked.

"Sure. All out," a gruff voice answered.

The bulky shape kept moving about, all bent over, as one who might be carefully investigating for hidden sparks or crumbs of fire. He shook his arms, flapped his paw-like hands against his thighs; again, he blew into his palms.

"Burn yourself?"

A voice whooping in the darkness, a voice instantly recognized as that of Doug Davis, jubilantly came up from below:

"Good boys! That was the ticket, ripping off the wagon-sheet!"

North came to the ground, to be followed presently by the burly shape of the other man, who wearily let himself down over the side of the wagon-box.

"I say, Doug," the wagon master instructed his assistant, "keep the men moving. Have water ready." Turning toward the individual whose powerful proportions stood vaguely revealed in the darkness, he added with brusque felicitation:

"Good work, Dobe Dan. And now come with me. You better have a dressing on those blistered hands."

Massively dark, the stalwart fellow stood awhile in sullen perversity; then his heavy shoulders gave a

shrug of contempt. "Go to hell!" he muttered, and stalked away, in pride, perhaps, and in shame at having vindicated his courage.

Would he now relapse once again into his besotted state? Very likely, North thought; but could not help looking with sympathetic interest at that insolent fellow who rapidly sank and vanished into the smoke-choking acridity, the ash storm and black heat of the blustering night.

CHAPTER V

Benediction

STRONGLY blowing, the wind kept up, and all night long it blew. The colour of the stars, now a-gleam with an amber rather than a crystal quivering, betokened the presence of dust, even though the darkness had at last wheezed itself clear of smoke. How vast the burning had been could be appraised, in some measure, by the parched tang of the wind, by stale smells of charred stubble and crusted earth and fine ash forever dusting up out of that fevered void, a wilderness burnt black.

Men slept. They slept as beings stunned, bowled over, exhausted by the immense labour and strain of fire-fighting. On the ground, everywhere about the wagons, they had dropped down, too weary to bother about blankets. Here and there one of these corpse-like figures disclosed itself in the glow of a passing light, a lantern carried by someone who seemed nothing but a pair of boot-tops with knee-bulging trouser legs stuffed into them.

Cruel the exigency which required men bruised and spent with fatigue to stand guard through endless watches of the night; yet for the unslackened vigilance which the commander saw fit to maintain four sentinels had been posted. Three of them expressed satisfaction that they were to be relieved by others

at the end of two hours, instead of serving the customary four-hour period, as on other nights. Neither did the fourth man openly grumble. In the glow of the lantern, when he had been told off for the first shift, his dusty face twitched into a smirk which might have been intended to express docile obedience. As for what underlay that grimace—the real feeling, the spleen, the perversity, the vindictive craft—who can tell what it was?

Stand guard, eh? What for? As if there could be any sense in it, now that the cattle were to be held shut up all night in the wagon-corral! No, it was only that the leather-head of a boss—damn him!—wanted to impose on folks. Liked to show his authority. He might find out, maybe, that he couldn't trample over everybody.

"Let sleeping dogs lie," goes the adage; but what about the sullen ferocity of a vicious man when *he* is kept awake?

The wagon master knew how ill advised it would be for him to take any rest, despite the itch and burn of heavy eyes; for Big Andy's random guess as to the origin of the fire had been far from reassuring. "Spite work of Indians"—it might truly have been so. A plausible hypothesis, seeing that the red man of the plains could not be pleased over the invasion of the buffalo country and the enormous destruction of the wild herds menacing his food supply.

This, then, was not a time nor a place for drowsy vigils. Hourly, throughout the windy watches of the night, North must make certain that the guards posted about the wagon-corral did not relinquish the plodding of their beats, or the careful scrutiny of the dark.

Once, in making his rounds, he came upon a dim bulk propped like a flabby bolster against the spoked radius of a wagon wheel. Sentinel Number Three fast asleep!

Being brusquely shoved aside, the fellow staggered, caught his balance, and again stood limp and slouching, with head sagging heavily as before. When his feet had been knocked from under him he only fell, struck the ground with a grunt, and lay motionless where he dropped. After he had been much shaken and knocked about, he began to mumble with languid surprise:

"What's up? What's the rumpus?"

"Want to sleep, do you? We'll get you a cradle. Is this the way to do guard duty? Is it?"

"Asleep? Me? No, boss, that can't be so. Resting a little. That's all it was. Just resting a little. Sort o' played out."

All at once the shaggy head of the sentinel began to wag with a loose and jerking violence.

"Why are you away from your beat?" North demanded, giving the man a tremendous shaking. "This is not your post. You know damned well it's not. Let me tell you, Beeson: you are going to get back where you belong, or something is surely going to happen to you."

Catching up his rifle, after he had been flung with a rigorous jolt against the wagon wheel, the guard went slinking away toward the particular spot he had been set to watch. Then, darkness having blotted him out, North returned to the wagon where lay the blanket-wrapped cocoon of Big Andy.

"That you, Doc?" A heavy yawn followed the

question, succeeded by sundry small sounds, as of a dry tongue moving about in a sticky mouth. "Things are quieter," the sleepy fellow added. "Cattle all bedded down at last."

For a time the wagon master did not speak; but his quiet voice presently made itself heard.

"Andy?"

"Well, Doc?"

"Listen, will you, and tell me what you make of those yelping howls off yonder to the north. Are they coyotes?"

Without much hesitation the plainsman answered: "Wolves. Gray wolves." He harkened awhile longer before he added: "That's it, gray wolves."

"Thanks," North murmured. "Wanted to be sure. For I've been wondering, rather, whether Indian signals are ever sufficiently deceptive so that even a practised ear can't tell them from the howl of these animal prowlers. Sometimes a human note seemed to. . . . I very much wanted to make sure."

"Wolves," Big Andy repeated, while remote wild whimpers, tenuous and thin, continued to float past in the black wind whistling through the wagon spokes.

Feeling somewhat reassured, the wagon master once more started away into the night to satisfy himself as to whether the rebuked sentinel had properly taken up his watch at the station assigned him. That particular outpost lay distant some hundred yards or more from the corral; for the prairie being cleft to the northeast by one of those ragged arroyos common to the plains, it was a place to be regarded as suspiciously convenient for the stealthy

advance of marauders. It had been from a covert of this nature, as North had learned on competent authority, that a band of Kiowa Indians, in the valley of the Republican River, had crept with cat-footed craft to the dismaying surprise of an immigrant train.

Common prudence demanding that such a ditch-like hollow be carefully guarded, North cautiously went forward until he had reached the swale, and let himself down into it. Here, entrenched from the wind, he continued to peer about. He could not see his man. Nothing at all appeared save the dark whisking of grasses along the rim of the rain-washed gully.

Strange the fellow had not come here! Farther up or down this ripped seam of the earth he might be dutifully on watch.

North began to tap with the rim of a brass cartridge against the steel of his bowie knife. As a hailing sign he gave three sharp clicks, and harkened acutely, to hear whether the picket would answer with two metallic raps of a like character, as he had been instructed to do.

The wagon master held his breath—waited—listened—repeated the code. Still no response. Until his eyeballs ached with the pulling sensation of forced scrutiny he kept up his efforts to see the guard.

In this creviced void an errant gustiness sometimes caught and sucked along with a hollow roaring as of heavy seas bursting on a broken shore. But since hereabouts the surf of wild fire had not run, North could hear the scratch of coarse grasses etching the gloom above the jagged banks. Up there sharp bristles of the yucca plant stiffly shook in spatters,

inky black, while sable clumps of sage also bent and brushed about in wind-swept shudderings.

Were they rooted in the ground, those jerky bushes? Or were they slyly and stealthily creeping on? . . . One hears strange talk. It is said that Indian scouts practise the deception of disguising their heads with crests of wild sage. But these? No, they did not advance. They nervously bobbed and bowed and shivered to the lashing hiss of wind, but did not leave the ground.

Thoroughly convinced of their inoffensiveness, North began, for the third time, to tap his knife-blade with a cartridge. And now, in a shiver of affright, he caught his breath. Something had whizzed by in the wind. He could not be mistaken; for another of those brief, husky sounds—another and yet another viciously stung the air. What could they be? Not arrows! Certainly not, for who would be shooting arrows blindly into the black night?

"Birds!" he muttered, and chuckled, much relieved, after the scare they had given him. Poor, restless things, he mused; winged creatures with nests destroyed by the fire, and now flying hither, forlorn refugees, to this region where the grass had not been burned! "That's it, birds," he repeated, "homeless little larks."

Click—click—click! Once more, and now for the fourth time, he tapped out that deliberate signal with brass and steel. Still no sentinel's reply from out the cavernous gustiness of the wind-humming gully.

But had not something moved, down there, at the bottom of the chasm? A thin, sooty stain seemed to have blotched the darkness like something afloat

on an invisible tide. And did it really have motion? Yes, it did; undoubtedly it moved, and kept moving. There were intervals when it moved fast, with an alert, stealthy crawling. Presently some clods and loosened earth tumbled with swishing sounds from the bank, as if the secretive shape had tried to draw itself up out of the ditch.

Instantly, then, the shadowy object held still, and seemed to listen before creeping forward again—this time more cautiously. More swiftly, too, like some predatory beast ready to spring.

North gave a start as another bird whizzed by. He waited. He heard a sheltered cricket begin to trill. The gaunt creature, stealthily crawling, had plunged suddenly upright.

Then, "Halt!" North demanded. "Don't move." All furtive alertness instantly stopped. He heard something strike the ground with a clack and a steely ring.

"What's this, what's this?" he questioned. "What are you doing here?"

"Me? I'm on guard. Can see I am, can't you?"

"So, Beeson, it's you! Yes, it would be; it couldn't be anybody else. For even that beefy partner of yours wouldn't come crawling here like this. A man, after all, is Dobe Dan. But you . . . Huh, a good night, right enough, for this kind of nonsense. Meant to get your knife into somebody, did you? Well, pick it up. I say," North repeated, "pick it up!"

The guard stooped quickly, sidled away, then came back with cheeky protestations. "Was just scouting down the gulch a little," be avowed, and sniggered

to show how laughably absurd it was that he had been so fantastically misunderstood. "Thought I better have a look around. That's it; that's all there is about it. No harm meant. No harm in the world. Honest to God, Doc, I never meant anything."

"Didn't? Oh, of course! You didn't mean anything. Let it go at that. You can even explain, no doubt, why you left your rifle behind. Too noisy, eh? You much prefer to slit a throat quietly, in the dark, and hide the body in tall grass. But we won't talk of that. Far too disagreeable, I'm sure, for a person of your delicate sensibilities. Only there's this about it: you'll be on picket duty for the rest of the night. If you expect to see morning, you will keep awake till then. You will stand guard till sun-up. Now be off, you blackguard. Back to your post."

Left to himself, after the sentry had slunk away with craven eagerness; and understanding that he had come safely through yet another crisis, it is strange that North should have felt within him a sort of grinding ache: a sharp, physical pang of hunger, and also a benumbing surrender to drowsiness. Oh, for a little sleep! To let himself go, to drop down anywhere and give way to this unutterable fatigue!

But the hunger and the faintness quickly passed. For a feeling stronger than these demands had all at once come upon him. Someone was singing. On his way back to the wagons he leaned against the black night wind, pausing to be sure whether a vocalization could actually be making itself heard in the heave and blustering of the wild darkness. Since the cattle were bedded safely in the corral, and did

not require the song-assurance of the herdsman, who could be singing out here, on this desolate heath? Who, after such a day of strife and exhaustion, could still have the hardihood to sing?

Harken as he would, only faint catches, much confused and blown about, were vaguely wafted to his ears. But it did not matter. He liked the song. The wind pushed him and fumbled him. And he liked the wind. Stars vastly thrilled the fathomless vault of heaven, and he liked the stars. The Milky Way, that Trail of the Ghostly Feet, as Indians call it, arched the sky in the pale peace of an ineffable sweetness, and it seemed to him that his soul, like the song, was flying into space, soaring light and vibrant and delicately free.

The grass had burned, but new grass would come; the green joy of the prairies would be born again; the wild flowers would bloom; the little birds would have their nests. He knew not why it should be so, but a freshness, a felicity, a beneficent joy had entered into him. It was as if he had been cleansed by fire, as if withered tangles and choking growths had all been burnt away.

Here the mystery of earth and wind were one with the mystery of the stars, and he himself was a part of the vast holiness, a part of the wonder and the glory, an undefeated force as virile as the sap in charred stubble, the essence unseen but still marvellous in the power and the poetry of promise.

Agaze at the crystal throbbing of the stars, he repeated the refrain of the old trail-song:

"Wine o' the wind, wine o' the wind!
Wine o' the big winds blowing!"

PART VII

DAWN

CHAPTER I

Joy

AT NOON, a man on a black horse, with rifle in front of him, came racing toward the wagon-camp. He shouted as he came. He demanded to be told, for God's sake, was there a preacher in this outfit?

Being distressfully tongue-tied, the poor fellow lisped like a girl; yet when he had been informed that the caravan could yield him no member of the clergy, his lisping grew remarkably loud, and vivid, and capable. For, damn it all, he *must* have a preacher. Needed one "the wortht way." A doctor, too! Had been trying, all forenoon, to roust out a doctor and a preacher.

Once the importunate stranger had dismounted, with the wagon men clustering about him, he felt himself nudged in the side by an elbow. One-Eyed Mike cautioned sedately, with a hand to his mouth:

"If it's all the same to you, we hope you'll try to keep your language tamed down a little, on account of the Bishop." With a jerk of his thumb he indicated Matt, the hunchback, who was hanging a bean-kettle over a fire. "Us boys," Mike went on, "always put a double-locker on our cussin' when he's around. Strains us some to control ourselves, but nothin' we wouldn't do for the Bishop."

"Bithop? What ith a bithop? Thome kind of preacher, ain't he?"

"*Some* kind? Why, next to the Pope of Rome, he's the very genteelest kind of a preacher there is. So hard-working and earnest with his preachin' that he gets stunted with it, and humpbacked."

Big Andy didn't like the joke. It was not the thing, not hospitable; so, in stern rebuke, he muttered.

"Idiot!" Some folks, he said, always have to get smart and show off. Nonsense often worried him; but now, especially, he was not in the humour for it, since he had been unable to get away from the plodding ox-train, because one mule of the powerful team recently substituted for his two span of yoke-mates had sickened from eating loco weed.

"We have no priest or clergyman with us," the stalwart plainsman told the newcomer. "A doctor, yes; but no preacher."

"Too bad," the stranger asserted. "It ith for a fack. Because a man died on us, and we got to have thome words thaid over him, and prayers. Got everything fixed; box made, grave dug, and all. Want to do ourthelves proud on the burial. Us boys took a vote to make out which one would have to read a piece out o' the Bible, and mebbe peel off a prayer. And who gets 'lected? Me! They choosed me. And how ith it goin' to thound? It won't thound good. I *know* it won't. It's goin' to thound like hell!"

Blushing and grinning, the man with the lisp explained that he belonged over at Gov Marvin's ranch; that he had been sent for a doctor, but still

hoped to get a preacher. He further told what thing had happened to the man who died.

"Poor lad, he got drug and trompled. Awful mithfortune. Was night-herdin' in the bottomland, and did what had been ordered: hitched himthelf to the bell-mule. Went to thleep, I reckon. In the night the Injuns jumped the herd. He got drug and trompled. Yeth, awful mithfortune."

The stampeded mules, it appeared, did not belong to the ranch but to an immigrant train. As for the need of a doctor, one case was that of a man gored by a buffalo. "Bad, mighty bad," the lisper declared. "Tim's leg is all thwelled up, and looking green. Ought to come off, I expect. But how come off? We ain't up to it, us lads ain't."

He spoke of "Gov's woman," the ranchman's wife, and in the mention of her, touched his hat. She, he thought, could turn the trick, if anybody could. Yes, for she was that kind of a person; could do anything, if it *had* to be done.

"Not now, though," he explained. "For there's a new baby to be born, in two days, maybe, or three."

To right and left, as he talked, the man had been looking into the brown and bewhiskered faces about him; and presently he inquired:

"Which man of you ith the doctor?" Seeing the gaze of the bystanders turn toward the wagon master, the stranger asked at once: "You? Are you the doctor?"

Harry North, for the moment, did not answer. Worn, thin-lipped, and shabby, he looked away. When he did reply to the simple question, it was slowly, with laboured accuracy:

"Someone is hurt. A child is to be born." He moved a hand across his eyes. "Go with you? Why, yes. Must, I suppose, if the people of this wagon-train are willing I should."

He had little doubt of their consent; and yet the visitor had no sooner been taken away to be fed and shown the hospitalities of the camp than North felt a timorous tugging at his arm, while someone earnestly cautioned:

"Don't do it. Don't go away with that man."

What familiar tone was this? A contralto voice, quiet and low and richly modulated, and so confidentially near that North felt a warm breath upon his cheek.

"Eh, what's that?" Coming out of his detached mood, he saw dark eyes looking into his, while again the earnest voice importunately urged:

"You mustn't be leaving us. You shouldn't."

A startled look, and then an astonished smile brightened the gravity of his face.

"You, Winnie? It is! It's really, really you."

"Dangerous country," she was saying. "Women and children are in this outfit. Your place is here."

In dubious questioning his hand went out and took away her man's slouch hat. He looked and looked at her, and in wistful reproach shook his head.

"A boy! You dress like one, you look like a boy. Sometimes I have thought that . . . and here, now, at last. . . . The herd-boy. You stay with Mrs. Ross. Eh, don't you?"

"Please," she enjoined, as a reddening glow warmed through the tan and sunny bronze of her cheeks. "Stop it!"

"But to cut off your hair like this!" he went on. "Oh, Winnie, how *could* you? All your beautiful hair cut off!"

She tried to put scorn into the toss of her head, the scorn of one who is far past all thought of charm or feminine frivolity.

"Last night," she was saying, "we heard wolves in the hills. Real wolves, do you think? Ask Andy. He knows they were not wolves. Indian signals—that's what! We're watched. It won't do for you, the wagon-boss, to be leaving this train."

Harry North caught her by her wrists; and with a grip nervously strong and even painful, he held to them as if to make sure of her, to convince himself that her presence here could not be some fantastic error of the senses.

"I didn't quite know it was you. I thought so, but there was no certainty. On the night of the fire, the someone who helped strip off the flaming wagon-sheet—you, Winnie! Wasn't it? And you have sung. I have heard you singing in the darkness."

The girl's head had shyly drooped. "Please, please!" she begged, and with a tone more imploring: "You won't be leaving with that man. You mustn't, Hal."

"Why elude me? Why, Winnie, have you kept away so long? And I not wanting to intrude! But you must have known, surely, how I would want to see you. You did know. You couldn't help knowing, for sometimes I have sought you, I have called to you, I was sure it could be no one else than you. Sure? No, I wasn't, either; I wasn't a bit sure."

Suddenly he laughed, his voice ringing out with light, boyish, gay-hearted gleefulness.

"Are you going with that man?" she demanded. "If you do—but you shouldn't—if you do go, I'm going, too. A good thing to put a grain sack under your saddle-blanket. You don't do that, but you ought to. Keeps a horse's back from getting sore."

He gave no heed. His mood of absurd youthfulness and vivacity continued.

"I was all the while waiting to hear you sing. In the night time I heard you. Old Rollins' song. Good old Rollins! But is it partly Spanish? 'Wine-o'-the-Winds,' eh? A queer, odd, simple, nonsensical thing to be so heartening! You sang it; and was it for me, Winnie? Was it?"

"To ask that," she stammered, "such a thing to ask!" Her head bowed once more, and her clipped dark hair fell forward over flushed cheeks like a pair of black wings.

"It's unbelievable," he went on. "I touch you, I hold fast to you; and yet, even now. . . ."

"Let go. You hurt!" she protested, but straightway added: "No, don't let go. I don't care. I want it to hurt. . . . And, Hal, are you glad? You're not sorry? You won't be cross with me?"

All at once she tore her wrists away from him, and shook all over with a strange shuddering.

"I'm a fool," she said. "I don't belong here. You like me. You talk kindly to me. But you . . . it's the other one that you. . . . Only I . . . just like a dog, came tagging along."

From the ground she caught up the battered hat which North had let fall; and as she snatched it from

the earth she also whipped it angrily across his face. Then she ran off, blindly, and at random. But she had not gone far when she stopped, and turned, and called with choked laboriousness:

"Don't forget! A grain sack under the saddle-blanket."

At the circle of halted wagons she scurried between the wheels, and disappeared.

CHAPTER II

Revolt

IT WAS a windless day, an afternoon of scorching heat, when the horseback journey of the two men began at a leisurely pace; for no matter how urgent the need of haste, the animals must not be hurried too much at the start. Only when they had warmed to their work, breathing evenly and regularly, would the time be right for accelerated galloping.

A short distance they had gone at a mild and easy canter, when someone on a roan-coloured horse overtook them and went spurting past. Gun-belted, rifle in hand, this rider used a blanket and surcingle for a saddle, and merely a noosed rope, a hackamore, for a bridle; and after fleetly dashing ahead, the animal ranged a little to the right, into an expanse of rough and broken country. The eyes of the men, as they watched, began to ache from the hard white glare of the sun.

The silence vibrated with heat. One somehow gained the impression that the sand hills, cleft and torn by batterings of wind, were all faintly a-throb, as if they might be ready to flow like melted wax.

By and by the advance rider, upon ascending an elevation out-topping the others, dismounted and stealthily crept along, going higher and higher, to peer cautiously over the crest.

"Injuns around real spry, don't he?" the ranch hand observed; and even when put right as to the gender of the pronoun he had used, he presently added, still holding to his own idea of sex: "Thee him come! Thits his horse good; a pretty rider."

Speedily drawing near, guiding solely by knee-pressure and bodily swing, the energetic saddle-horse checked with singular abruptness his rapid pace. The men were asked at once whether either of them had a pair of field glasses. That they weren't so equipped didn't matter, Winifred announced, because she could see far; she could read cattle brands at greater distances, her father used to say, than anybody that ever worked on the range.

"Yes," she added, "good eyes."

"Very!" said North; at which she pouted and looked aside and told him please not to be a silly, because he knew well enough that what she meant was only that her eyesight could be trusted for a good look around. But glasses, all the same, do sometimes come in handy. She wanted to make out whether bright colours on a pony, among wild horses grazing on the mesa over yonder, were stripes newly painted or whether they had faded with much weathering.

"You don't listen," she suddenly protested. "You look, but you—— I can't bother with dresses. I would but I—— And if you look, it makes me—— I feel ashamed."

Her face had been averted, and a little futile movement of her hand gave token of a modest longing to smooth down some skirted drapery over trousered knee and boot-leg.

"Paint," she went on, with hurried speech, "means

something in Indian religion. Means a lot: blue for the holy sky, green for the holy earth, red for the holy sap of life. Andy says so. He says the Cheyenne is careful to wash off the paint from his war pony after the fighting is done."

She did not have to speak more than this to make the questionings of her mind clearly understood. Why had not the sacred colours been reverentially effaced? Had the Indian rider been killed, leaving his mount to stray away into that wild herd? And if the paint had still an unfaded look, wouldn't that mean that the fight had been a recent fight, and at a place not far distant?

All at once the girl turned upon North's companion with an accusation impatiently scornful:

"You come for a doctor. You don't act square, you don't tell him of stage stations being burnt. Why *didn't* you tell him? Thought he wouldn't go with you if you told. Is that it, or not?"

The ranch messenger blinked owlishly, not knowing what to say; and she went on, with a bit of laughter: "Ha, as if he wouldn't go! But he would. He's that kind."

Harry North glanced uncomfortably at the man, with a look which seemed to say: "They go on like this; they talk, women do."

Winifred added with ironic unction:

"A great wonder he'd let you go with him. You might get sunstruck. Once, so I've been told, he got a lot of bad frost bites because he didn't bother with a guide when a blizzard was coming on."

Half-malicious glances kept darting from her dark eyes, glances eagerly sly to catch any possible change

in North's inscrutable face. And that he should retain such a hold upon his non-committal reserve must have furthered in Winifred a restless and unhappy desire to see him wince.

"Say," she suddenly blurted out, and laid a brusque hand on the arm of the man from Marvin's ranch, "maybe, at some time, you've owned a dog. Have you? Ran after you when he wasn't wanted. A nuisance, eh? Oh, a dog like that—a dog! The master don't even have to whistle for him, but here he comes, skipping and jumping and wagging. He nearly dies of happiness if only he gets his head patted. Disgusting, so it is; it's disgusting!"

The bewildered fellow squinted and squinted. He had the confused expression of a person who wanted to ask: "What in the world could possess abody to make abody go on in such a queer fashion?" When he had confessed an inability to make out what she was "getting at," Harry North left him with the riddle by saying:

"You'll excuse us, won't you, if we ride a little to one side for a bit of talk?" At which the girl declared, with anger and softness struggling in her voice:

"No, Hal North, you can't come that. You can't send *me* back. I won't hear of it."

Even after they had ridden some hundred paces to the right it seemed for a long while as though North's hope of a private word with Winnie was to be defeated; for she did nothing but ride beside him in taciturn perversity. Neither of the two seemed willing to say anything. The girl held her face turned away, and pretended not to notice how his gaze continuously rested upon her. Although she may

have avowed within herself not to be the first to speak, it was she who really did speak first.

"Just like a dog!" she exclaimed. "And it disgusts me, so it does. Why not go away, and never see you any more? Why don't I? I ought to. That's just it. And—of course—I really did go away. Never to come back, I thought. Yes—but —and if I did come back, what was it for? Only to tease and torment you. That's it; for nothing else!"

North looked at the smooth curve of her cheek, richly browned by the sun; and after a long pause he began speaking to her with a grave gentleness which she did not like.

"No, Winnie, you couldn't be spiteful. If you've tantalized anybody, perhaps it's yourself you've tantalized most of all."

"I have; that's so. I've tormented myself. I've thought of you, I've sung my songs. Foolish little songs! And what for? All for nothing. If you heard, maybe you didn't want to hear. Or *did* you want to—a little——? Say you did. Please say so. Make it a lie, if you must, but say so."

"You know, surely, that I—— Your guitar was still sounding the night I tried to find you."

"You made a rush; yes, you did. Of course. But what for? 'I've made him cross,' I thought. He only wants to catch me and scold me."

"Scold? Do I scold?"

"You do. You're getting ready to do it right now. You want to send me back."

"And if I don't?" He paused, and sighed, and raised her face by gently pressing his hand under her chin.

"To have you with me," North conceded, "would be pleasant; perhaps useful, too. But, Winnie, there's something else to be considered."

The last of this he had not finished when the girl suddenly stopped her ears with her fingers, and impishly smiled. "Talk away," she told him, when his lips no longer moved, "talk, be reasonable, lay down the law as much as you like. For you see how deaf I am. Awfully deaf. I don't hear you."

"You may not hear," he answered, "but you understand. You know perfectly who ought to be staying with the wagons, now that I am called away. It's not that I find fault with the assistant wagon master. A good man, Doug Davis; I don't criticise him. He is popular, he has pluck, he means well; but I can't help feeling uneasy about his contempt for danger, his over-confidence."

"There you go!" Winifred protested. "I see what you're coming at. I knew it would be so. But you can't talk me into going back. Andy's there. I don't need to go back."

"Oh, yes—Andy! But if his locoed mule doesn't get well, he'll be getting another mule, and then, good-bye to Andy. He's so confoundedly impatient! And even if he were to stay, I know a certain girl, quick-minded and swift to act, that I'd sooner trust in an emergency than any man."

"Oo, hear that!" the girl exclaimed. "It's nice. Say some more. It does make me feel so awfully smart. Only I see what it's for: it's to brag me into doing what I *won't* do."

Laughter broke the spell of seriousness; North

couldn't help being amused at her droll shrewdness. But presently he said:

"There are the immigrant children to be thought about. You will think of them, Winnie; you can't help it, because of the great fondness you have for little people."

"Shucks!" she exclaimed. Resentment had come into her eyes, her lips pouted, she declared wistfully and angrily: "If you're not just too mean and hateful! You impose on a body. A taskmaster, a tyrant."

The hand he laid persuasively upon her shoulder felt a very impatient shrug.

"It's not *my* outfit," she declared. "It's nothing to me. Why should a girl bother herself about anybody's bull-train? Has plenty of men, hasn't it?"

"Winnie, Winnie!" he murmured.

"No, Hal North, I won't. You needn't ask. You're only making excuses. And *do* stop the begging look you have. I hate that look—— There! that's better. Smile, then; smile away. But that's no good, either, to get rid of me. I shan't go back. I shan't!"

She might say so, but she did not believe it. The winking of her dark eyes, the twitching of her red lips, and the wistful drooping of her head had made her decision plain to him, even before she announced, very simply and humbly, with a dry swallowing in her throat:

"So you are going on without me?"

After a time she was adding, out of the strange humbleness that had come upon her:

"Who knows when we shall see each other again?

Days go by, weeks go by, and I am waiting all that time to find out whether you would want to see me again. And here, now, to-day—at last—— But it's only to separate."

"Why, to-morrow I may be back," he unconvincingly assured her. "Yes, to-morrow, or next day; in three or four days at the most."

She made no answer to that, but beseechingly added: "A little ways further I'm going; to that hill, yonder. And then——" She covered her eyes with her hand. North tried not to look; he meant to keep his face turned resolutely aside. But he could not help saying, very gently:

"What, Winnie, what! Are you crying?"

She shook all over. She began to laugh. "No, devil take it, I don't cry. I won't!"

Abruptly, without any further word of farewell, she whirled about, waved her hat, struck her horse with it, and went frantically galloping away, back toward the wagon-train.

CHAPTER III

Playful Ferocity

THEY rode all night. During periods when first one slept and then the other, with hands on saddle-horn and head drooping, the dark hat of the sleeper would swing in abrupt semi-circles, while the head of the watchful rider performed an up-and-down movement, much less pronounced.

On coming awake each asked in turn, unfailingly, "Any more?"—a question having reference to yellow flares glimpsed at great distances, among the hills, intermittently warming and cooling, like the glow of a cigar in the darkness of a vast room. Signals, of course; Indian signals! But who could say what sinister commands were thus being flashed into the far spaces of the night?

Odd it seemed to Harry North that he and his companion, amid indications so formidable, could find it possible to sleep. A man, to be sure, gets used to danger; and if multiplied perils are continued long enough, he comes to feel that he is immune; that luck is with him; that, whatever befalls, he is surely to escape disaster. Begotten in youth especially, this egotistical confidence is much the same sort of naïve and irrational faith which the red man acquires through his trust in a personal fetish, a little bag of sacred charms worn upon his person.

Neither of the riders, for all that, took any pains to disguise the relief he felt in the coming of the day, now dawning clear and temporarily cool. Larks began to call. A sandhill crane, with long and slanting legs, flew low, with powerful wing strokes, toward a green islet of the Platte.

With the rising of the sun tawny mounds like heaps of sand began to rise into view, all warmly yellow on one side. Haystacks, Harry North knew them to be; and from the bottomland, along the river, a metallic whirr, not unlike the noise of a harvest fly, began to grind.

"The mower—hear it? Thound carries a long way, don't it?" The doctor's companion seemed delighted with the mechanical buzzing through space, as if a clock were being rapidly wound. "A fine meadow," he announced. "No better wild hay anywhere."

He smiled, he went on listening. Then, all at once, his smile seemed to mummify. "Queer!" he exclaimed. "Awful queer the way it thounds!" He stopped his horse, the better to give ear to the hay-making activities; and having listened, he began to babble in a preoccupied fashion, in an effort to reach some reasonable conclusion regarding the thing called queer. "Jane and Jake," he muttered, "a good mule team, all right; fine workers. I never drove no better; but, all the thame, I never did hear the mower hum like that."

"Smoke!" North suddenly cried out. "Hay's afire."

"Injuns!" the other gasped. "Thure as Lord God Almighty!"

As by a common impulse the travellers incontinently snatched off their hats and made a point of clamping their knees tight to their mounts; for even from a great distance white horsemen are to be identified by covered heads and swinging legs. It must therefore be the part of prudence to ride as Indians do, in order to delay as long as possible the attack likely to come.

North let out a deep breath. He felt better. No more suspense, no more grisly dread of uncertainties. He said to himself: "So, then, it's come." Intellectually he realized that deadly peril lay ahead, but emotionally he felt a buoyant sense of relief. All nervous apprehension dropped away. After hours of tense watchfulness and strain, here, finally, was no longer the treacherous unknown, but a definite situation, something to be seen and understood.

He further realized that desperate alternatives had now to be considered. Very logically he told himself that one could always turn tail and run for it. Yes, but with what small chance of success, being mounted on a horse far spent with night-long exertions!

Everything considered, wouldn't the better risk be that of going straight on, in the hope of reaching the stockaded enclosure of the ranch? A tale of a stage passenger who eluded Indian assailants by getting below the river bank and there lying submerged for a day and a night came into mind, proposing still another possibility of escape.

Briefly, one after another, these expedients were named; but the movement forward, never slackening for an instant, gave token that the risks of a fighting chance were the risks to be accepted. Tacitly com-

mitted to this course, both men watched the incendiaries, those barbaric destroyers on ponies so far distant as to appear like thumb-high pygmies playfully scurrying about on spotted kittens.

North's companion, being no longer diffident as people with defective speech are likely to be, had begun to show concern in regard to the burning hay. Too bad, wasn't it? A great pity! The "old man," as he called his employer, supplied a heavy tonnage of forage to Fort McPherson, and had almost finished putting up enough hay to fill his government contracts. Those flaming stacks, every one of them, were honest in substance, with no brushwood or willow poles under them, fraudulently to swell their size.

To hear the lisping fellow go on about the tricks of cheating contractors, and to hear him express a poor opinion of commissary officers who allow the government to be swindled, one might suppose that he could be taking no thought of the crisis, the really desperate crisis which must presently be met. How soon that ordeal might assert itself could not be guessed; but the more the men furthered their advance toward the ranch, the plainer they could see how the spectacle in the clipped lands, sere with stubble, had assumed the startling aspects of a howling and delirious sport.

Feather-crested riders on swift ponies went darting about. Several of them, with brown bodies oiled and a-glisten, kept bending far over, rising and falling with the effort of cudgelling a team of runaway mules. Bows and lances belaboured the beasts, and in terror they hurled along, dragging the mowing machine which bumped ponderously over rough

places, always frantically whirring. A fine plaything, this wheeled contrivance! It could purr louder than a mountain lion! Two revolver holsters a-dangle from the vacant seat crazily thumped and knocked about, now scuffing together, now jouncing and jerking and fantastically flapping.

Like youngsters in an orgy of destructiveness, as when boys prankishly stone the window lights out of a vacant house, the Indians gave themselves up to this mad excitement; they yelled and laughed, they jubilantly whooped.

Metal gnashed. Slack chains clanked. Loaded wagons, being fanned by the wind of motion, blazed with a fiercer fire than the stacks; and bullock teams, heavily galloping, seemed more affrighted by crackling flames than by the screeching clamour of naked bowmen and lancers. A tumbling trail of blue-gray smoke streamed in the wake of each jouncing hayrack. North watched the fumings. With eyesight grown inordinately sharp, he could see that whenever the panic-stricken oxen fell off in speed, they had arrows shot into them to hasten their pace.

"Eh, a pleasant little pastime!" he exclaimed, and felt below his ears the ache which comes from the tension of set jaws.

His companion answered:

"Just you wait!" implying that those gambols in the hayfield were as yet but feeble little tricks, inoffensively moderate.

Once more the man grew talkative, and this time it was with rancorous scoldings. They wanted a doctor, he had gone for a doctor, he had fetched a doctor. All right. And now what? He would be damned if

he could see why they weren't on watch. What ailed them? Why didn't they *do* something?

The log-built house stood plainly revealed in the distance, with two windows agleam in the sun like sheets of new tin.

"Do?" North questioned. "What in the world can you expect them to do?"

"Throwing off on us!" the other peevishly complained, and went on muttering contemptuously. He couldn't see what had got into them. "Act as if they couldn't thee the fix we're in," he venomously asserted. He did more than complain of the ranch folk; he expressed a passionate desire to punch the heads of the whole decayed outfit, "inclusive and complete." Incidentally he hoped to God that they would "all get their dirty scalps histed."

This embittered earnestness, combined with lisping and stammering, had grown to be outrageously absurd—but not funny, not a bit more comical than the ravings of a maniac. One even suspected that the fellow might have gone out of his head.

But he hadn't. His faculties remained alert, as could be seen by the way he loosened his six-shooter in its holster, by the care with which he examined the breech of his loaded rifle. If, in truth, something might and should be done by his friends in this emergency, he had grown far too anxious and too angry to explain what it was.

"There, thee that!" he exclaimed, as a scurry of ponies came swooping out of the hayland. "An Injun trick: let us think we're O. K.—then jump us! Here they come, the varmin! To cut us off, just as I knowed they would."

There could be no mistaking the intent. In the ruck of wild riding some score of bronze torsos glistened; they shone with a lustre as if the lithe bodies had been modelled in chocolate about to melt. From dark flesh gleamed vivid notes of colour: scarlet, orange, virulent green, in stripes, in bars, in fantastic ornamentations. Paint glowed, too, upon the ponies, whose manes and tails held fluttering feather-tufts, as did each warrior's gayly decorated shield. Here and there a trailing headdress, eagle-plumed, billowed aslant like a sumptuous wing about to detach itself and soar away.

"Looks dirty," muttered the man from the ranch, even though, in a visual sense, everything appeared amazingly clean. Lance points glittered, gun barrels flashed; earring, bracelet, arm band, every bit of metal glinted with harsh sparkles.

Acutely as North realized the peril of this onrush, it exerted upon him a ghastly fascination—a mood savage and fanatical, a lunatic impulse to let out a screech of defiant yells. But with the nearer approach of those ponies madly galloping, he choked suddenly, as from strangling winds.

Fear? Was it fear? "This must be fright," he told himself.

It was, certainly; fright, and something else! It was the thrill, the exhilaration, the unreasoning and unreasonable faith of youth and of blood, the ancestral and aggressive power of our Aryan race which goes spreading itself over the continents of the world, seizing the land, conquering, dominating, imposing its unyielding will upon all peoples everywhere.

"We'll make it," he said. "Have to. Can't afford to be headed off."

The other man gave no heed. Full of dreadful oaths and vehemence, he did nothing but curse.

North talked. He *had* to talk. He was saying:

"Malcolm would do it. Get through, somehow. Partner of mine, old Doctor Malcolm. Went through the river once. Flood time, ice running, bridge swept away; but he, you understand——"

When North realized that he was foolishly repeating over and over, "Must get through"; "have to"; "surely must," he stopped talking, and laughed queerly.

Still the ranch hand continued to swear, but no longer in the same spirit as before. The mood of his profanity had changed. Now it was not with a grumbling of surly irritation that he swore, but volubly, with elation, with pride, with amazing good will. His great paw smote the sweat-drenched neck of his horse. He spluttered; he wanted it understood that they had "come their little trick." They had; they'd "done it"; they'd "come it at last!" With an ecstatic howl he thrashed his hat up and down, absurdly, jubilating.

"Yeth," he specified, slanting forward in his saddle, "they've come it, they've got a wiggle on, they've rolled out the dummy!"

Timbered gates, over yonder at the corral of the ranch, had been struck open. Something trundled forth—something mounted between a stout pair of wheels; an object dark, clumsy, awkward to handle.

"Dummy?" North exclaimed, still in a muddle as to the significance of that grotesque cart which three

individuals briskly wheeled into position, and aimed like a squad of artillerymen.

All at once there had come a fluctuating uncertainty among the ponies streaking out of the hayfield, single file. The leader hesitated, swerved to the east, and all the others veered with him at the same time, in the same direction. It could be seen that they deemed it imprudent to take chances with this snub-nosed, short-barrelled piece of ordnance, so unexpectedly shoved into place and sighted at them.

Chuckling and gasping delightedly, the ranch hand declared:

"A churn, only a churn! Gov's woman had the idea. A churn painted black. I hustled the wheels. I helped rig up the damn fool thing. She got the notion for it, and we—— It's a dummy." He repeated that it was a dummy, "a reg'lar damn fool dummy." But it worked. "Hey, don't it?" he asked. "Don't it work good?"

For the present, at least, the galloping ponies, always in line, going backward and forward upon the prairie in curves like those of the letter S, continued their fleet manœuvring at a distance far removed. It was caution learned, no doubt, from previous experience with shrapnel violence hurled from the kind of "big gun which coughs twice, with two thunders."

"It does work," North agreed. "It should let us through; and will—if nothing happens."

CHAPTER IV

Beleaguered

WITHIN the ranch house cartridge boxes had been broken open and ammunition made ready. Everything which might hamper the movements of the defenders had been cleared away. All such work had been accomplished without any fumbling nervousness; for what with the strain and violence already experienced in having fought their way to shelter, the further fighting of the men would be much the same as a commonplace labour. Bits of oiled rag littering the floor indicated that rifles and six-shooters had been newly cleaned to meet the demands of another ordeal.

Peering through loop-holes, two men watched a squad of Indians still busy with the torch engaged in firing the last of the stacks in the bottomland. The house jarred meanwhile with a rigorous thumping; for a woman with a hatchet had begun to knock at the chinking between the cedar logs, that new places for peeping out might be opened. As North, with saddle-bags across his arm, strode briskly in, followed by his companion, she turned her head to speak over her shoulder in a manner apparently unperturbed:

"Be careful, boys, not to get into that." A movement of her elbow indicated a great mound of cor-

pulent bed ticks in the middle of the floor, above which a snowflake flurry of little feathers was still idly floating and dancing, puffed about by some stray whiff of breeze. "The children," she explained, "are in there. And they don't like it; they fuss, it's so hot and stuffy."

"Here he ith," North's companion announced. "The doctor, I've fetched the doctor." He seemed hurt that people were taking so little notice of his accomplishment. Even the woman seemed less concerned with what he had done than with what had happened to her churn.

"Too bad about that. Stood in the sun too long; it shrunk. The boys jolted it. Staves all fallen in."

It really was too bad; for such fighters as the Sioux and the Cheyenne are not the sort long to be deceived by a piece of artillery whose parts have chosen a poor moment to collapse.

What seemed very strange to North was that the woman should concern herself so little with the fact that the big-gun deception could no longer be kept up. It was rather the incident of her butter-making implement going distressfully to pieces that troubled her. She even declared with head-shaking regret:

"Hard to get, churns are. Awful hard to get!"

Doubtless the newcomers, having reached here safely as the result of the clever trick, might have received a more cordial welcome in circumstances less menacing. But this, surely, was no time to hold a reception. The effect of the cheat practised upon them was to make the Indians grow more audacious then common; for after their period of

excessive caution they now appeared doubly anxious to attest their courage and boldness.

The tongue-tied man, for all that, felt that the homage of a little notice was his due; and so, with unwarrantable fervour, he proclaimed most aggressively:

"Here he ith, here he ith—a doctor! You wanted him, and here he ith."

When one has been pluming himself on his accomplishment, how can he help but feel abused over such seeming indifference of comrades? What kind of an outfit was this, anyhow, to take everything for granted?

"The doctor—oh, yes!" the woman belatedly conceded, and even added with mothering indulgence: "That's good, Nat. First rate." She likewise contrived to give him a gratulatory smile over her shoulder, and to recognize North's presence with a brisk little bow. "Excuse me," she said, "but I'm watching for Hawk Barnes. Sent him for the blacksmith tongs. We need them, the tongs."

For what? North wondered, and grew conscious of the throb occasioned by a crude flight of steps shaking from the tread of someone slowly mounting. With the labour of carrying a cumbersome burden, a massive individual had begun to toil upward toward the loft. Step by step, moving slowly and with balanced care, he was conveying a lax form which must be that of a wounded man. Irregular ticking sounds rose with him—the drip-drip of flowing blood.

"Who's hurt?" Nat questioned. "Is it Dave?"

"Don't feel like me," a voice from the stairs answered, and one heard a gasp, a gritting of teeth.

"No, it don't. Feels like somebody sorta spoilt. Too much iron in my carcass to feel right chipper."

"It's in the bone, the thigh bone," the woman affirmed, still with her eye to the peep-hole between the logs. "Yes, the thigh-bone, and bedded in solid. A lance-point, most likely. Too big for an arrow-head. We can't get it out. But tongs, the blacksmith's tongs. . . ."

Nat, apparently, was not a man to control his curiosity about this matter. "How," he asked, "did Dave get prodded? Was he driving the mower?"

"I was." The injured man gulped. He could be heard declaring, after he had been carried out of sight, into the loft: "Two guns on the mower-seat. Yeh, two guns, sure as Christ! Only me, I didn't bother about 'em, cleaned out, emigrated, ran like a whitehead."

Hoarsely and harshly he went on babbling, but what he was saying had jumbled together into a syllabification wholly unintelligible. A comradely voice, at the same time, talked to the wounded man, telling him not to fret himself, and to keep still now, if he could; for where was the good to "blab and gab and go on that-a way?"

The woman said, without looking around:

"Dave talks, you can't stop him. Awful down at the mouth, poor lad. Got rattled, and lit out, and keeps on making that kind of a row."

Briskly North suggested that perhaps she had some lint ready. Had she? And would she tell him, please, where he might find some white cloth, cotton, or linen, which might be used for a dressing?

Intently watchful as before, he heard her saying,

"That . . . of course . . . ready. But no hot water. That's the trouble. Tea-kettle's empty. And Hawk, you see, when he ran out. . . . He's gone to the forge after the tongs. . . . Took the bucket, the water bucket; I saw him take it. But why? What made him? I don't know."

As she spoke a quick waspish sound spat through the room. Something went *chug* into the wall. An arrow had stuck there, with its slender shaft still a-quiver.

Then, as two rifle shots resounded in the room, the mound of bedding on the floor began to move, to open a breach at the top, whence came forth the heads of two children, a boy and a girl. But the tanned and moist little faces dodged back at once.

"Now, now!" the woman rebuked, having glimpsed the earthquake undulations of the feather beds. "Don't you do that again. Daddy won't have it. He'll scold. I'll tell him, and he'll scold."

Distant guns went off, a few scattering shots, not much louder than small hailstones against a greased paper windowpane. Now and again one heard a dull thump, as of a slug taking lodgment in a log, with a wooden drum-beat. From time to time, as the most daring of the warriors made a sally, racing up close to the house on their swift ponies, one heard a crash of muskets. Arrows also slit the air. They stabbed wall and ceiling, they stuck about the windows. One must have hit a spike-head, for it rebounded, clicked sharply on the floor. As North picked up the feathered shaft he saw that its point had bent like a fish-hook. Could it be possible, he wondered, that the war-bow of the Sioux and the

Cheyenne justified its reputation as being an arm more powerful than a cavalry pistol?

While he examined the arrow, grooved, slim, delicately balanced, he heard a deep voice insisting:

"She ought to lie down. Eh, Doctor, don't you say so? Hadn't she ought to?"

Brawny and quiet, the questioner was he who had carried the wounded man upstairs. "Ought to lie down," he repeated, "in the bedding there, with the children. Hadn't she?"

He had rested a sun-browned hand upon the woman's shoulder, not merely with firmness but with the imploring and protecting kindness of a husband whose wife has come near to the season of childbirth.

"She shouldn't be on her feet," North emphatically asserted. "Certainly, certainly not!"

Disdaining to answer, gazing nowhere but through the chink, into the strong white light, the powerful sunshine of the plains, she affirmed quite reasonably:

"Water, of course—hot water will be needed. A fool trick to take the bucket away. If only we. . . ."

A brisk clamour of rifles engulfed what she was saying, and a penetrating smell of powder smoke, harsh and gaseous, thickened unpleasantly. The eddying vapour gave everything a bluish tinge, and where sunshine pierced through chinks one could see motes of dust mixing and trembling with the dissolving fumes. All at once a weird and screeching wail clove the air—the scream of a horse mortally hurt.

"I wish, Cora," the ranchman entreated, "I do wish you would; but—h'm!—you won't. A senseless thing; it don't help any to stand like that. But you won't lie down."

He sighed, shrugged, went away to mount guard at a loop-hole. Rifle in hand, dirty, begrimed, powder-burned, he showed the effects of the fight in the hayfield; and what with his shirt being drenched with perspiration, the wet cloth disclosed the easy play of great muscles on shoulder and back.

The most curious phase of the situation was its matter-of-factness, as if fighting were not an ordeal, but an occupation. Now and again, when the guns were still, scraps of conversation could be heard. Someone informed Nat about the funeral of the herd-boy trampled to death, the burial having taken place last night, after sundown. Two marksmen started an argument concerning the relative merits of mince pie and pumpkin pie.

"Coming!" the woman exclaimed. "Here he comes. But the tongs? Yes, he has them. And the bucket."

From without sounded a brisk sheep-bell sort of clanking, as of a tin cup knocking about inside an empty pail.

The man called Hawk had scarcely bounded into the room, with North jerking open the door, before the woman anxiously inquired why he had used up all the water.

What, she hadn't seen what he was up to? He panted, he explained with rags of phrases. "Stable sheds . . . hay roofs . . . fire-arrow. There in time. Bet I was! Doused it out. I did, by thunder! And *whuzz!* I got this. Lookee. Shows up something grand, don't it?"

He carefully projected his arm—carefully, lest the arrow which had pierced his shirt sleeve should fall

out. Instantly the men began to make nonsense of his exploit. They scoffed, they pretended to be skeptical. He had picked up that toothpick, and shoved it through his sleeve, and come in to brag and swell around and act noble.

Nothing of the sort! No, sir. Hawk had dashed out the blaze, had chased along to the forge, got the tongs, and then, by thunder. . . .

"Aw, take a walk!" a jeering comrade advised. And the man with the arrow grew exasperated, he tried to explain, he flung the tongs clattering to the floor.

"Don't mind them," the woman consoled. "Don't get so provoked. What makes you? Can't you see it's only to plague you and get you roiled that they go on like that?"

"That's the way they do," he declared. "They act smart. Well, all right; let them. They can go to the devil, with their grins and their rotten jokes." His mood shifted. He sank on one knee, rifle in hand, and kept talking as he peered through an open chink between the logs. One saw him wag his head as with vague words he deplored something in particular.

"The gray mare . . . arrows . . . stuck full . . . regular pin cushion. Dead, of course." He couldn't forget the whinnies of her colt. "Little fellow wasn't scared, but hungry; that's it, hungry. Wanted his dinner, and she, his mother. . . ."

"Don't!" North objected, with his mouth close to the man's ear; and Hawk glanced up in puzzled surprise, adding with regret:

"It's bad. A man don't like to see that. It, somehow . . . it's bad!"

"Yes, yes; but hush, for heaven's sake!" He glanced significantly toward the ranchman's wife; and the young fellow, now that he understood his own tactlessness, called himself a leather-head.

"Didn't think," he mumbled. "Ought to have more sense. But I, it seems, I talk; I blab away!"

As a ripping crepitation suddenly jarred the room, the acute ear of the physician caught the whimpering outcries in the loft. The noise of guns had perhaps given the wounded man his chance to let himself go; for doubtless he supposed that his groans would not now be heard by his comrades.

"This won't do," North told himself, chafing with impatience; for he thought of the man gored by the buffalo, as well as the one hurt by the Indian lance. "Why dawdle? Why be idling here, while those two patients lie uncared for up there in that stifling heat?"

Action was the thing. He snatched up the bucket, he demanded a hot fire. "Lively now," he ordered, as he sped toward the front door. "White cloth and lint, Mrs. Marvin. Must have that, and hot water, and get a-going."

"Don't go out. You sha'n't!" the woman interdicted. "A crazy thing to do."

"The well's in front. I saw it," said North.

"Stop him!" the woman shrilled.

"Be right back," the doctor added. "A brisk fire. Must have hot water."

"Grab him, stop him!"

But no one stopped him. Rifle shooting had begun again, a brief and tearing frenzy of guns.

North jerked the door open, and started nimbly

forth into the eye-wounding glare and torpor of dog-day sun. As he strode along, bucket on arm, he noticed that the distant hayfield, now deserted and desolate, still feebly fumed from ash heaps and burnt-out violence.

Some twenty paces from the threshold a spotted Indian pony lay in a lax heap, with legs doubled under and neck outstretched—a huddled mass, stone dead.

CHAPTER V

"Friend"

WINKING in the glare of sunshine, with thoughts for little else than professional exigency, North went rapidly toward the well. To the south he could see no galloping ponies. Only the one, apparently, had been killed. Passing within a few strides of the fallen beast, war-plumed and painted, with feathers in mane and tail idly a-flutter in a whiff of wind, North went by the water-trough, and seized a gray-bleached rope; then, above the timbered curb, the pulley creaked, while a moist coolness came up to him from the deep hole. As the dripping well-bucket rose, it caught the sun, flashing brightly, and drops struck the water, echoing in a splatter of sounds from far below.

North had nearly filled the kitchen pail when a twinge of white-hot pain stabbed through him. What could it be? Precisely as if a bent branch might have sprung back and struck him below the shoulder, a smart blow spun him half around. A twig, notched at the end, with feather guides along the slender stem, protruded from his body below the left shoulder. A grotesque notion came to him: "It's like a wall-peg. I could hang my hat on it." He gave the thing a little pull, but it did not come out. Under his shirt a flow of liquid warmth gushed down.

"Hell!" he muttered. "I'm hit."

He could hardly believe in this happening. No one in sight. Nowhere an Indian. Incredible, then —really absurd that he should have an arrow punched through him. But here it was, all the same, a feathered hat-peg! Down his back he could feel a rapid seepage of blood, while in front a crimsoning stain came blotting out through the gray fabric of his shirt.

"It can't be," he told himself. Then he grew naïvely vexed. Such a thing as this shouldn't happen to a man who has his work to do. It was wrong. A contemptible, shameless trick. And all the more disgusting since vacancy alone seemed to have shot this shaft.

But something moved on the other side of the dead pony. He could not be mistaken. Not merely wind-fluttered feathers, but something. . . . "You, was it?" he peevishly called out.

A crafty head had raised itself; and malignant purpose showed in the fleet bending of a bow. But this time it was with ebbing strength and wavering uncertainty that the thing bent and sprung, while the released arrow took a brief flight only. Nor did the brown, lithe body dodge back into hiding, but went lax all over, and sank across the dead horse, heedlessly sprawling there.

Wounded, eh? "Hurt?" North called out. "But what, old boy, if you're not really hurt, and only shamming? You may do something nasty if I . . . Whew! I'll risk it, though. I'll have a look at you."

Briskly yet circumspectly he approached; and he

was thinking as he went: "To be pegged like this, why doesn't it hurt more? Later the pain will come; but now, as if the nerves were stunned. . . ." He was interested in his condition. "In excitement," he told himself, "the range of vision seems to be enlarged. I don't look at this bucket of water; I look ahead, and yet the tin cup floats, it bobs on the water, and I see it bobbing. Ordinarily I wouldn't. Or would I?" Later he would experiment to satisfy himself on that point. But how queer that the mind should have so many facets! In a flash he could be thinking of a hundred things, and yet have his main attention focussed on something quite different. But his chief thought was:

"I'd better watch out. Don't want to get a knife-blade into me. Confound him, I wish he'd drop that bow. He's hurt, but he grips it, hangs on to it." Suspiciously halting, North called out: "Hey, now, no tricks! Let me turn you over—so! In the chest, eh? No blood; but a hole—a little, inconspicuous hole. And how the air does whistle in! Pulse laboured and choppy. Can't have you for my hospital; you, with that little hole in your chest! And seeing what a specimen you are, anatomically perfect, I wish I might. But you're done for, you plucky devil! I wonder that you had the strength left in you to give me this. Amazing, it's amazing. . . . Here, drink. Come, open your mouth. I'm in a hurry. A few cold swallows . . . . do you good."

A brown bare arm jerkily moved; and the hand, still gripping the bow, struck out with spent violence, giving the proffered tin cup a denting knock. Ear-

rings of white shell angrily quivered, and the dark eyes feverishly blazed. The warrior had raised himself. By a grappling wilfulness of determination he sat up; and panting for breath, his white teeth a-gleam and the bullet-hole raucously wheezing, he leaned forward, shaking with weakness and racial hate. He did more than summon this remarkable energy. In a triumph of malignancy he spat a stream of blood-mottled saliva into the doctor's face.

"Such manners!" North exclaimed. "You don't like us, eh? Of course not, of course." Mopping his face with a sleeve, he dipped the dented cup right back into the bucket. "Cold water. Take some," he insisted with impatient eagerness. "It's fresh. You'll like it; sure to. The sun's so hot! What, you won't? Too bad. Sorry, but I can't stay here coaxing. Work to do. You might, at least, take this tin cup in your hand. There, that's it, that's the way. Now we begin to understand each other. Wish I might carry you in out of the sun. Can't, though. Maybe, if you hadn't stuck this into me. . . . How did you manage it, hey? with so little strength!"

North had dipped his handkerchief in the water, that he might sponge off the lips, the tumid lips all parched and glossy and cracking open like old varnish. The mouth began to relax, it opened a little, and the hand with the filled tin cup began to raise itself feebly.

"I thought so!" North exclaimed. "Water is what you want. I knew it. Well, then, drink!"

The hissing of the bullet-hole grew more pronounced while the Indian drank. He hardly swal-

lowed, he let the water run down his throat while North held the cup for him. Afterward, when the whistling heave of the brown chest resumed its former rhythm, the dark eyes seemed to lose their malignant ferocity. And the brown fingers shut zestfully upon the dripping cup, when it was once more pressed back into the dark hand, as something to be left with the dying man. In the moment that this was done for him he dryly gave voice to some sort of husky articulation. It was Dakota speech—two syllables, laboriously gasped:

"*Cola!*"

North, fortunately, knew the significance of that word. He understood that the dying man had called him "Friend."

This word being uttered, there remained nothing more for the warrior to do but to answer, in the native way, the calling of the ghosts. A toilsome chant he struggled to pant forth; for it must have been plain to him that he had been mortally hurt, and hence it was necessary for him to begin singing his song of death.

As North hurried back into the house, with drops spatting down from his water bucket, all appeared indistinct, veiled by swirling vapours of choking powder smoke.

"Called me friend. '*Cola!*'" he fantastically jubilated. "That means 'friend'. He's dying, and he . . ."

In startled astonishment someone cried out:

"My God, he's spitted!"

"An arrow," North explained, as if people could not see what it was. "I'm bleeding, underclothes

all sticky, awfully disagree . . . Hark! Hear that? His song of death. And he called me friend!"

As the weighty bucket was taken from the doctor's hand, "That's it; thanks," he said. "Fill up the tea-kettle. Must have hot water. . . . The poor devil didn't want to drink. Lips all cracked open, and yet. . . . But I got some down him. He liked it. Awfully grateful."

Someone behind North was trying to cut through the arrow shaft, to get rid of the point; and he winced as he felt a tearing wrench in his wound.

"Hurry up!" he commanded, with irritable impatience. "Why the devil are you so long about it?"

He must be getting to work. Such a lot to do!

The whittling continued. Made of some wood astonishly tough, the arrow had to be held still while the knife-blade cut through it.

"Tongs," North was saying, "blacksmith tongs—ha, what delicate instruments for a surgical case! Must use them, though. And I can. See, my right arm, fortunately. . . . Good it's the left side instead of the right."

The iron point being cut away, he himself gripped the arrow's feathered end, and deftly unsheathed the slippery shaft from the wound. As he cast the stick from him, it struck sharply upon the floor and rebounded, leaving spatters of red. Only when he stooped to catch up the tongs did momentary dizziness come upon him, making everything in the room seem to heave, while a drift of black specks whirled before his eyes.

As they stopped their dance, and as the floor left off its strange tip-tilting, to lie decorously flat again,

he told himself: "That's good; that's all right. I sha'n't faint." He started at once toward the staircase, but cautiously, lest the planks should again begin their giddy trick of rocking under his feet.

"What's this, what's this?" he exclaimed. "You?"

The thing vastly astonishing to him was that the ranchman's wife, on hands and knees, should be dragging herself up the flight of steps, laboriously crawling.

"Must help," she answered with decisiveness, and kept on with her toiling efforts. "I can. We'll make the riffle. Get the boys cared for—that's the first thing. Are you much hurt?"

"Come down," North summarily demanded. "You can't help. Not the thing. Leave the lint there on the step, and the cloth. I sha'n't need you. Send me Nat."

Since she did nothing but continue her dragging ascent, he cried out in angry disapproval:

"Faugh, this won't do! A senseless, unnecessary thing to undertake. Let me tell you, madam, I sha'n't hold myself responsible for your case if you . . . How *can* you behave like this?—you, who know so well that you shouldn't!"

He couldn't quite make out what she was answering; but it seemed to be something about dear boys who fuss and fume; and what makes them? Had the arrow missed his lung, or not? How reckless of him to run out like that. A shame and a pity, so it was! And the poor lads needing him so!

Halting and sitting down on a step to give herself a breathing spell, she looked below into the room, and shook her head with disapproval as the mound

of feather beds began stealthily to quake. It could be seen that the two children were once more moving restlessly about inside that obese cocoon.

"I see you!" their mother called down to them, as heads and shoulders slyly peeped forth. "None o' that. Get back at once. Stay covered up till Mother says it's all right to come out."

They whined and whimpered and coaxed—but obeyed, for she shamed them into obedience. Then she added, indulgently smiling:

"It's hot. They don't like it, the poor dears. So awfully hot, a regular smother."

North passed her, mounting the few remaining steps into the stuffiness of the loft under the low-pitched roof. He was followed by the woman, unflaggingly resolute, courageously determined to give the last atom of her strength for the succour of men wofully needing to be helped.

Assisting her to her feet, with what gentleness and strength he could command, North shook his head over her, exclaiming in wonder and in reverence:

"You shouldn't, of course; but, all the same. . . . And I know of others—at least two other women—who would behave in this situation exactly as you are behaving!"

CHAPTER VI

Achievement

IN THE brownish and sunburned grass, over a wide acreage, are scattered curious white heaps where predatory beaks make a clacking noise. Now and again a welter of wings darkly pulses up, to settle again where other slatted ribs and carcass skulls blotch the prairie like a chalky scurf.

Wherever wolf-fangs have not yet finished with the bones, the ravens are scared away. Cawing and growling disputes clamour out of space.

But why quarrel? Come, buzzard; come, crow; come, coyote; come, all ye scavengers of the plains! For here is still dead flesh a-plenty; there will be feasting for days to come. Horny bills need not peck for ticks into the backs of living buffalo, since with the killing of many cattle there should be suet and meat enough, fat meat and lean meat for all.

Little prairie wolves are cautious in their approach. They slink furtively about a pile of abandoned bones, now going, now coming, circuitously sniffing. Do they, perhaps, scent wood and iron? Something which may still be giving off a hint ominous of man? Arrows, eh? Well, one is right to beware of them!

Many shafts have buried their points in the paunches of cattle soberly grazing; and although the chewed grass keeps on running out through the arrow-

holes, the wounds, it is probable, are eventually to close up and heal.

Seeing that four horses stalled in the sod-built stable had been spared the ravages of the raid, Marvin observed, on the day that North was leaving:

"Not so bad, not so bad. Take it all around, we've come out of it pretty lucky."

As a companionable thing to do, by way of speeding the guest who had been of untold service professionally, the ranchman was riding a few miles with the doctor; and while they cantered along, North inquired whether the Indian, killed near the well, had been buried.

"But no, of course," he added. "How stupid not to remember about that! Two friends of his, on their ponies, caught him up and carried him off. I was told so, but I forget who told me."

"Daredevils!" Marvin exclaimed, with a shrug signifying, perhaps, that he would like to forget the whole affair. "Well, and how goes it with the puffy shoulder?" he asked. "Painful, I reckon. Must be wicked sore."

"Some inflammation and swelling; a little infection, too," North replied. "But nothing to be uneasy about." Special gratification he expressed regarding the sling of brown linen which Mrs. Marvin had provided for him.

"Doing well, ain't she?" the ranchman inquired.

"Surprisingly well," the doctor answered. "An easy birth, and a fine baby, strong-limbed and sound."

"Yes!" the father emphatically agreed. "A fine baby, sure!"

After parting with the ranchman at the end of a few miles North could hardly wait to get back to the wagon-camp. He had done well; he knew he had, and now what he needed was someone to rejoice with him.

Alice, to be sure, would not be there to offer felicitations; but her image was constantly before his mind. He recalled the circumstance of their meeting, after his return from Twin Cottonwoods: very little said, but how much expressed by what was to be read in her gentle eyes and by the beatitude of an understanding silence! She had gloried in his achievement. Whatever doubts had afterward assailed him, he knew that then, surely, she had been proud of him.

Riding swiftly along, he grew conscious, presently, of a tune running in his head; he even began to hum the simple melody, but at first did not know what it was. Then, in astonishment, he realized:

"Why, it's a song, it's Winnie's little song, 'Wine o' the Winds.'"

He would see her presently. She would be glad of his return and of his accomplishment.

He went on humming that homely ballad of the cattle trail; he hummed it consciously, zestfully, with a realization that carking remorse and morbid brooding had been thrust aside, finally, by rough, rude forces, by elemental ordeals, by the big, invigorating winds of life which blow adventurously.

North told himself:

"She will be watchful for my return. A long way off she will see me. And—who knows?—perhaps she will come dashing out on her horse, to give me welcome."

He even had the idea that she might possibly come to him dressed becomingly, in girlish fashion, with all the feminine airs and graces that it would be possible for her to command. Only nothing of the sort really did happen. It couldn't happen. In the hush of the camp, as he drew near, in the brooding silence, he felt the icy misgiving which comes to us, we know not why, to stab the heart with an intimation of irretrievable disaster.

In the after years he was wont to think of how he had tried resolutely to go on humming the refrain of Winnie's song; and how the air and the verse had eluded his memory, as if all the courage and robust spirit and sweetness of the brave little melody had gone away, to the last echo—gone utterly, and never to come again.

PART VIII

SUNSET

CHAPTER I

"Jumped Us"

IT WAS Sunday. If, then, the wagon-camp lacked activity of every sort, North could urge himself to believe that the hush meant nothing more than the accustomed calm of sabbatical repose. He tried to take cheer from the bright serenity. But the more he reasoned that all was well, the more unreasonably his dread refused to be driven out. For the suspicion came to him that the manner of the men was not what it ought to be. They did not call out to him as he rode up; they had no greetings, rough and hearty; several teamsters even showed a hang-dog guiltiness, like schoolboys trying to look innocent.

Doug Davis alone contrived to put on a bold face. But what had gone with his ease and devil-may-care nonchalance? And why go unshaven of a Sunday, he who was so finicking about that, and about curling the ends of his black moustache? He even spoke with exaggerated heartiness, in a tone abnormally brisk and loud.

"Here you are. Showed up at last. But what's this? Hurt? Have you hurt yourself?"

Embarrassment sounded in every word he spoke. He aided in the unsaddling of the horse; and it was not friendly help merely, it was something pro-

pitiatory—the shamefaced eagerness of a person trying to confess and to atone. One might have thought that he had never before seen a horse all darkly wet where the saddle-blanket had rested. As the animal lay down to roll, with legs stiffly rocking, Doug regarded the commonplace performance as though it were not merely interesting but somehow novel, not to say vastly astonishing.

North looked at him. He looked, and the startled uneasiness of his eyes was the gaze, unmistakable, of one preparing himself to hear bad news. But he said nothing.

"We—yesterday," David finally stammered, "and the day before—yes, and every day since Wednesday—expecting you."

"Come, Doug," said North, "speak up, why don't you? What's wrong?"

"I know what; I do, of course; everybody does. But—a long story. Better have her tell it."

"Her? Do you mean Winnie Barton?"

"No, for she's hardly able. She's hurt. Mrs. Ross is who I meant. Come on. Better see Mrs. Ross. We been afraid—all of us been scary that Winnie wouldn't hold out till you got back. I was to fetch you to her. I promised. She made me give my word that I'd sure wake her up if she happened to be asleep."

He did not leave off talking; he seemed to have wound himself up to say anything that came into his head. Winnie, he declared, had been sleeping a lot. It was the weakness, maybe; it must be that, the weakness. "One-Eyed Mike tries to crack jokes to please her; makes out pretty well; never knocks off

on his funning. Wants to have her believe that everything is going to turn out all right. Same here; I try, we all do, all try not to pull a long face."

"Indians?" North heard himself ask the question, and he remembered afterward that his voice sounded not at all strained, but quiet and natural. It surprised him to speak like that, especially so because of the labour it cost him—an almost overwhelming exertion to utter that simple word.

"Tuesday night—jumped us," Davis muttered. "Night time—yes; it was in the—— Mrs. Ross will tell—— Last Tuesday night, that's when."

North said: "An arrow, perhaps. Was it?"

He received no answer. Davis had turned his face aside and would not speak.

The two men strode rapidly along, walking shoulder to shoulder, and skirting the outside of the wagon-corral.

Winifred hurt? Perhaps mortally wounded? Impossible! That could not be so. North senselessly refused to believe that anything of that sort *could* happen; and with the strain of this forced disbelief trivial inconsequences had begun to float into mind. His eye being caught by the incongruity of a delicate ring worn on a finger of Doug's knuckly hand, he even spoke of that bauble. "A pretty setting, but what kind of a stone?"

Only he didn't care in the least about the stone. He forgot it, he mentioned something else.

"It's come back," he suddenly announced; but what had come back—that Winifred's little song had begun to run again in his mind—he did not think to tell.

Abruptly stopping short, he slanted his head to one side and thumped it with the thick of his palm, as swimmers do when trying to get water out of their ears. Only this must have been some futile and foolish effort to get rid of pain, and fear, and hopelessness. His mouth quivered, but his voice remained steady and natural as he said to Davis:

"It's not right. A girl like that—such a woman—we musn't let her die. It won't do."

Once more he halted, and having pondered for a time, he gave instructions quietly and decisively, as a doctor should.

"You, Doug—there's a good fellow—you go to her. Not hurriedly, but appear casually as if you only dropped in for a moment. If she's asleep, don't wake her. If she's not asleep, be careful what you say. No shocks. Don't blurt out that I've come. Another horseman in sight, you can't make out who it is, and thus and so. Nothing to startle. Must keep the fever down—that's what I want. I'll wait. Stay right here until it's safe and right for me to come."

Being left alone, he was seized with an almost irresistible impulse to cry out: "Hurry, Doug! hurry, do hurry along!"

The assistant wagon master strode briskly away, going off in the direction of something not unlike the square-rigged sail of a boat; for between two poles vertically planted in the ground—poles such as are used for hoisting wagons in order to grease axles—a canvas wagon-sheet had been suspended for the sake of the heavy shadow it would cast. Forming thus a screen against the sun, this object stood well removed

from the smell of cookery and the activities encompassing the wagon-camp. North understood at once that the men had thoughtfully provided the awning for Winifred, to make her as comfortable as might be in a region nakedly stripped to the enormous light of the Great Plains.

At that screen, behind which Doug Davis had disappeared, North continued to look, never taking his eyes from the gray patch, off yonder, the wagon-sheet puckered into wrinkles at each of the upper corners.

Seconds passed; slow minutes intolerably dragged, and although moisture glistened on his forehead, and ran jerkily down his neck into the shirt-band, he sometimes shivered as with a passing chill. Irritably consulting his watch from time to time, he once held it to his ear with the conviction that it must have stopped. It hadn't. Five minutes had gone by—five interminable minutes.

He must wait. He must go on waiting.

When Mrs. Ross joined him there, to tell him that Winifred was asleep, and resting more quietly than usual, he looked at her, and hardly heard what she was saying.

She was talking of Doug Davis. He was not rash, not precisely that; "headstrong" was the word she used. Not a bit keen for taking direction from anybody, or listening to safe counsel. Some wagon outfits had dug rifle pits after they corralled. Davis could see no good in them. They were nonsense.

Last Tuesday, at sunset, the wagons had halted near a fine meadow, lush with bluestem grass, a piece of pasturage so alluring that nothing would do

him but to have the cattle night-herded there. They needed to graze. Wouldn't do to keep them penned up so much.

"How's her pulse?" North asked. "Has she slept long to-day?"

With downcast eyes and lowered head, he had spoken with difficulty; then he added with a smile that was like a twinge of pain:

"Excuse me. I don't listen well. And yet I do hear you. Good bluestem for the cattle—yes. And go on, please. Needless to ask about her. I am to see her presently. Well, and then what? Stock getting travel-worn, many steers gone lame, I know about that. You needn't tell anything but the main points."

"Yes, of course. Well, as I was saying——"

And he thought: "That's unnecessary. Why doesn't she go on?"

"Doug wouldn't change his mind about night-herding, even though he knew that Big Andy had sensed something. Andy favoured holding every hoof inside the corral. But, no good; Davis wouldn't. Doubled the guard, though; and once the cattle had filled up on grass and water, they bedded down comfortably in the good meadow by the river."

It was hard for Mrs. Ross to proceed, feeling as she did that nothing of what she said was being heedfully received; and seeing that North went on looking at the canvas screen, she interrupted her account to say: "When she wakes up, I'll be told at once. They'll signal."

"Bedded down for the night," North prompted.

Mrs. Ross went on to say that she would not be

likely to forget the sounds coming up out of the darkness, the curious husky thumps which set her shivering with a dread indefinable. Resonant seed-pod rattlings had begun to shake through the night—noises not loud nor fierce, but terrifying in their unusualness.

What could it be? She had listened. She had raised the wagon-sheet and peered out, with a realization that daylight would soon be coming. But what made those sounds she had not understood?

"Queer how I awoke," she said. "As if I had been jerked to my feet."

She had done her best to make out the significance of the crusty thumps, the bumping and bounding, as of something dry and hollow crazily dragging along the ground. Witch-cries had wailed. Rending hoots and howls screeched through space. Confused hub-bub, a roar of running hoofs had come storming frantically up out of the bottomland. And light spurted, yellow pricks of light—gun-shots!

"We knew then," said Mrs. Ross, "everybody knew that the stock was being run off. We heard afterward that there were eight, ten, a dozen Indians in the raid. But that, of course—nonsense! There were two. That's it; two alone had turned the trick. My husband ought to know; for he, you understand, was on night-herd, and was fooled the same as the others were—fooled by the rattling."

Even when two ponies came blurring in through the darkness, it was impossible to tell what kind of frightfulness they had started. But Andy knew. Instantly he understood that two rolled-up rawhides, hard and stiff, with bones inside of them, were being

dragged along by lariats. The click and clack and rattle had combined with yet another terror still more effectual. It was a smell. The stink of the hides had been a compelling factor in starting the stampede.

"That did the business," Mrs. Ross affirmed. "Yes, even before those lung-ripping yells snatched people out of bed. Everybody has heard what an infernal hullabaloo a single coyote can make. He can make a body believe he's a whole pack of wolves. And it's the same with an Indian. Let two braves whoop as they did that night, and you don't know but what the whole Sioux nation has broken loose. We thought so. Hadn't a doubt in the world that our time had come."

"But," the woman added, and her voice sank to an admiring whisper, "Win Barton was different. In just no time at all she was on her horse, and away, racing like mad to go pushing in ahead of the stampede."

How "that harum-scarum girl," as Mrs. Ross called her, rode with the ruck of terrified beasts; how she kept shooting her revolver in front of them to turn the herd; how Big Andy, on a mule, assisted in this exploit; how Matt, the hunchback, had made good progress on a sick mule, until the animal balked suddenly and stood quivering all over, exactly as if he had butted against a stone wall—every detail of this Mrs. Ross recounted with remarkable fidelity.

In regard to the hunchback's dilemma she said:

"He had to jump and run; and a man on foot, you know, isn't a bit of good in a case like that. What

made him think he must help Andy? Foolish, of course. But he had a rifle with him. Thought he could help; went humping along after the cattle. Excited, I suppose; fearless, and excited, and never thinking to put back to the corral, after the locoed mule had stopped short.

"Now, if only the dark had lasted a little while longer! In the dark, maybe, the Indians mightn't have seen Matt. But day was breaking. They did see him. He crawled on hands and knees after he got hurt—dragged himself along till he could duck into a buffalo wallow."

In the irritable impatience which had come to North he began to pluck at the frayed edge of the sling holding the left arm. From time to time, as he raised his eyes, it was to glower at Mrs. Ross, as who would say, "Why all this mess of detail? Why doesn't she get to the point?"

This hurry of his could not help matters. It only confused her. She even went back over points already told, intolerably repeating, losing the thread, and beginning again.

Said North: "When Matt dumped himself into the wallow, did Andy see that? And did Winnie see it?"

"Yes, they did; they both . . . Andy, you understand, had been helping to get the cattle turned. Winnie had pushed the leaders from north to east, and was giving them a shove southward, for the corral. We watched it, the whole herd walloping along after the leaders. Then, first we knew, off galloped Andy—no longer with the cattle, but away from them."

"How intolerably she drags it out!" North was thinking. "Will the woman never get it told?"

"Rode for the wallow. For Matt, of course, had to have something done for him. Must be got out of his nasty scrape."

What distressed Big Andy in particular had been a quickening activity to the northwest, among sand dunes and hillocks of the broken country. Animated specks kept bobbing up and enlarging: now three, now four, others following. War-ponies, of course! A party of braves furiously riding to finish the work begun by the two raiders.

Could they do it? Such a thing seemed unlikely, and all the more improbable since the turning of the stampede had been accomplished. The cattle, still clumsily galloping, and now all strung out in trail fashion, had begun to take direction from two horsemen, one on either side, who doubtless understood the exigencies of the situation. Theirs, at least, had been the skill to keep the leaders pointed toward the wagon-corral; and once the terrified beasts had scented the wonted odours of the camp, that good and familiar home-smell promising security, they could be depended upon to run true, without further guidance.

"Win Barton understood that," said Mrs. Ross. "She understood and laughed. She laughed, cheering hilariously, swinging her man's hat. I wanted to see her come on in with the stock. I watched, I hoped. But she didn't, though—didn't come."

Gun-shooting had commenced. Andy's mule had stumbled and gone down all in a heap. "From a bullet, perhaps, or from getting his hoof in a gopher's hole. We saw it," Mrs. Ross asserted. "At once

Andy was up and away, spry as anything, now on one knee to shoot, now up and going it again."

North visualized the thing in his mind: the rifle, blue in the sunshine, gleaming like a bar of glass; thick whiffs of smoke shredding into webs and dissolving wraiths.

"Winnie rode toward him," Mrs. Ross affirmed. "Didn't come back with the cattle. We screamed for her to come; we yelled ourselves hoarse. She wouldn't, though. Wild, reckless, harum-scarum girl! She wouldn't come, however much we yelled."

The rest need not have been told. North anticipated everything, knew it before it was spoken: how Andy got into the buffalo wallow with Matt; how Winnie rode there, too, spurting along at a frantic pace, and how the two men and the girl defended themselves, effectively beating back the Indian assailants until the supply of cartridges had been shot away.

"Doug Davis called for volunteers," Mrs. Ross concluded. "I give him credit. Got men together, and led them.

"A little slow to get started. There was the trouble." Her voice suddenly dropped to an unintelligible muttering, something about "lock barn door . . . horse stolen. Too late, you see! Too awful late!"

North filled his lungs. His right hand had suddenly shut upon the woman's shoulder, gripping with a painful and even a bruising force.

"Don't say it," he demanded. In his eyes glared such a strangeness, such a fanatical determination as to frighten her. "*Not* too late," he went on. "Can't be. It mustn't be. I won't have that."

CHAPTER II

Hurt

QUIETLY, with a curious quiet, Winifred accepted the news about the hurt that had come to North. Mike, who had been trying to amuse her with his nonsense, was called aside by Doug Davis for a bit of private counsel before it was concluded that it might be best to tell her everything in order to prepare her for the appearance of the wounded wagon master. So, the report having been made by Davis, as tactfully as possible, she at once fixed her preoccupied gaze upon the sun-browned face of the companionable Mike. Her expression, meanwhile, was not that of suffering, but of intense thoughtfulness, as though her faculties might have been profoundly concerned with trying to decide some question momentously significant.

What question it was came out emphatically plain when she summarily insisted that Davis pencil a dispatch for her. She hardly dictated the words, but made shift to give the sense of what she wanted said; and before he had finished writing on a leaf to be torn later from his note-book, she spoke to the other man:

"Mike, you're to put the message on the wire for me. Will you?"

She knew, as did the whole wagon-camp, that the

Indian raids had extended far along the Platte valley, and that the Overland telegraph line had been torn down in many places. Now, however, soldier details had been ordered out to assist in the work of reconstruction, to reset poles and string wire, so that government messages might not long be delayed. For prudential reasons the augmented squads of regular line-men worked at night, with horses saddled and picketed, ready to take flight at the first alarm.

The commission which Winifred had assigned to One-Eyed Mike was one which a man could scarcely be blamed for not wanting to undertake. But the good-natured fellow didn't like to decline; he even decided not to decline—all at once, but to work around, by degrees, to his refusal, and tell why, and make it look reasonable. He began by criticising the telegram, as if everything depended upon the wording of the message.

"It ain't so," he declared, "you know it ain't so that Doc North is bad hurt. Been into an Injun bobble of some kind or other; that's so. But bad? How can you say bad, and him riding twenty miles and more, back from Marvin's ranch? Now, a man who's messed up bad, could he ride that far? I ask you, ma'am, could he, or not?"

In the shade of the improvised awning, the gray wagon-sheet which sometimes caught a torpid whiff of breeze and languidly bulged with it, Winifred lay with head and shoulders raised—first by her heavy Texas saddle, and next by three corpulent pillows lent by immigrant families. And while Mike stood, objecting to her telegram, she gave him *such* a look.

Not the pouting look of a sick girl, not that at all; but a look of crushing scorn.

"Listen to him!" she reproached. "That's what he's like. Just too mean and moral for anything. Deuce take you, Michael Moriarty!"

"That ain't my name," he protested, and grinned.

"I don't care. Let it be any scoundrelly name you like. I don't care. It's a hateful name. I know it is. Must be."

"Why is it?" he blandly inquired.

"What makes you want to be so moral?" she asked. "You might just as well not be so uppity, and righteous, and tiresome. If we want to say in a telegram that Hal North is badly hurt, it's all right. No harm in that. And he might be. Maybe he is. We don't know that he isn't. Do we?"

"Well, yes," Mike conceded, and scratched himself behind the ear. "He could be worse hurt than we . . . that's so. But that ain't the point. The point is that it's going to be ticklish business to get in amongst the line-men at night. You know, don't you, what happened to my folks when they moved out West?"

"Never mind that!" the girl protested, with her dark eyes impatiently brightening.

"Got their house and barn blowed away in a cyclone," Mike imperturbably went on. "That's what happened. And they didn't like it. But Pap tried to look at it reasonable. Said he always did like ventilation; and that country, down there in Kansas, had plenty of it, plenty of ventilation, but he reckoned the thing was just a leetle bit overdone. And same, here, Winnie; it's the same with this

business. If they see me moving in the dark, and mistake me for an Injun; if that happens, and I get too much lead in my carcass, I have a feeling that I won't care for the ventilation. It's a prejudice I got. I sure am ashamed of it, and try to get rid of it, but can't. Seems to be inherited from my folks."

"Quit, Mike," the girl implored. "Don't make me laugh. It hurts me to laugh." Her smile was of course what he had been after; and the merry look in her face so requited him for his joke; he was so bribed by this appreciation that he could not longer stand out against her caprice. All the men, indeed, felt that she must be humoured in her every whim; hence Mike did precisely what he had believed he wouldn't do: he took the message, accepted money for sending it, and undertook to "put it on the wire," as soon as the line should be open.

CHAPTER III

Fate's Cockpit

THE welcome North received, once he stood with Winifred's hand firmly pressed in his, was really absurd, almost laughable.

"Go 'way!" she cried out, frowning, and pouting, and beginning to scold. "I don't want you here. Not yet. It's mean of you to come so quick."

Something dropped as she spoke. The hand-mirror, by means of which she had been testing the effect of a lace-befrilled cap, crashed heedlessly to the ground, shattering there into a hard, bright glitter of glass fragments.

"You spoil everything," she declared. "I don't even get the ribbons tied, and here you come! You break right in. Is that a nice way to act? You might know a girl would want time to get fixed up a little."

"Vain thing!" he accused, and she had to laugh, despite the distress it caused her wound; and once the wincing quivers had died out of her face, she smiled again, triumphantly declaring:

"Made it myself, this cap. All myself. The women laugh at me; they say I sew like a man. It's pretty, though. You must tell me it is. One of the girls gave me the lace and the linen, and I had the ribbons. Mrs. Ross pressed them for me. They

don't belong, not really. I mean, I should have dainty white ribbons. Only red. you see, is such a jolly colour!"

"And terrible," said North.

"Where's Mike?" she asked. "Do call him back. He's funny, Mike is. He must tell you the story about mule nature. It will make you laugh, that one."

"Don't plague me, Winnie. I must see how badly you've been hurt."

"You sha'n't. Not now—not while you have such a solemn face. There, that's better. You smile, but it's such a cripple of a smile! Sit down by me. Talk. Begin now. Let me hear all about it, what kind of mess you've been into, what ails your shoulder, and everything."

But he did not talk. Having seated himself close beside her, he seemed strangely empty of words, and for a long while went on mutely gazing at her.

It was too much to bear, this strange, still look of his. Winnie had to turn her eyes away from him; but afterward they once more sought his face, while she declared with a note of exultation creeping into her voice:

"You did get there—in time. Didn't you?" He nodded, and she went on, with the same earnest tone of felicitation: "I was afraid you wouldn't. You went, and came; it's your own dear self back again! And this," she added, after a long interval of meditation, "this, maybe, will make it easier for me to quit. I've been trying hard to think it would. But—I don't know. A girl—like me—does so love to live. Only now, of course, there's lead in me.

That's how it is: lead, and you can't get it out. Nobody can. So, you see, it won't be long till I shall have to be cashing in, the same as poor Andy did, and poor little Matt."

"Andy!" North exclaimed. "Matt, too?"

"What, you haven't heard?"

Winifred's bluish eyelids quivered shut, and remained so for a time. Her hands, meanwhile, had clenched themselves into rigid fists. Long minutes passed before she finally whispered:

"A deep grave they have, deep; a wagon-tire marks the place. Deep, deep," she repeated. "Yes, with logs across it, to keep the wolves out."

Her manner brightened at once, as though she had quite made up her mind not to be sad; and when she saw Mrs. Ross bringing her something hot in a bowl, she imagined that she would like it; but, after all, she could scarcely do more than bring herself to taste the soup.

"Excuse me, I can't," she apologized. "It's horrid, I know it is; but then, Mrs. Ross doesn't mind, she puts up with me. Betsy Ross is her name, just as if she had made the first flag. She likes me, she takes care of me, she knows just how to dress a wound."

"Now, Winnie," North admonished. "You had better not talk any more. Later, perhaps, after you've rested awhile."

"Not talk? But I want to—and listen. I do so want to hear how you got through. But my head aches, I lose the thread; and if I talk I get mixed up, and only keep on saying the same thing over and over. You tell him, Mrs. Ross; tell him everything."

"'Not yet. It's mean of you to come so quick.'"

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
University of Toronto

"But I've already told."

"Have you? Yes, yes; of course, but I. . . . That's how I am; I don't remember."

"Never mind, Winnie. If you quiet down, and sleep awhile, your head will be sure to feel better."

North, himself, might be as giddy-headed as she, but he spoke with the quieting way he had, and afterward asked professionally:

"When has the dressing been changed?"

A fresh one, it appeared, had been put on but a short time before; and seeing with what skill the bandages had been adjusted, North concluded not to disturb them for the present, but to wait until Winifred, now too much spent with pain and excitement, should be in better condition to withstand the probing examination which might later be deemed necessary. As his trained eye, meanwhile, kept jealous watch of the lace at her throat twitching in time to the throb of an artery, he could scarcely have been in the least reassured by the tell-tale flightiness of a pulse feverishly irregular.

"Don't sit like that, so awfully still; talk," the girl insisted. "Begin, now; talk away, both of you. I won't listen much, I can't; but I do so like to hear friendly voices talking!"

The serious eyes of Mrs. Ross met those of Doctor North in mute questioning; and when he had nodded his assent she drew near to him to reseat herself upon the ground. Her full skirt flared out as she settled into place, and next collapsed into limp folds. She went on speaking to him in a subdued voice, purposely monotonous.

All at once Winifred raised her head, starting up

suddenly, her face drawn with the pained bewilderment of one who has been restlessly dozing. "Don't whisper," she urged. "It's bad, whispering is. I can't bear it." In the abused tone of a sick child she demanded a drink of water, but when the cup had been raised to her blanched, dry lips, she pushed it away, waving it aside as of no consequence.

Something remarkable seemed to have caught her eye. She was looking at North; in astonished wonder she was staring at him. By and by she smiled a little, with an imploring hopefulness; but her mouth quivered as she timorously inquired:

"Hal? Is it you, really? You're there, I see you, I expect you to float away, and—you don't. You stay. This time you do. It must be, then, that you've come back. Have you? Honestly?"

She had to hear him and to touch him to be convinced that it was truly himself, and not merely another of those tantalizing fantasies which come to fevered brains. "Your very self!" she cried out with abiding belief. "I was so afraid it wouldn't be. Sometimes it's not you at all; it's just nothing. But now. . . ." She smiled again. "Oo, and how I wish I could laugh. I want to; I'm that glad. Only I can't laugh; that's the trouble. I can't, Hal, because it hurts." There was something shyly mischievous and merry in her face as she went on: "You must tell him, Betsy Ross, all about what we've been into. Tell him, tell him; go right ahead. All about my great doings. Paint me up showy, make me out something wonderful. Will you?"

Her smile died out suddenly, to be followed by a frightened and sorry look. "I mustn't," she stam-

mered, "mustn't talk like this. It's wrong to be gay and forget so soon about the dear boys we've buried. Andy, you know, is dead. Little Matt is dead. They have a deep grave. They were always together, and they are buried together."

"Oh, Winnie, Winnie, if you please wouldn't! Not now!" North spoke to her thus, gently and quietly, and bade her rest a little, if she could.

"Just one thing," she implored. "Do let me tell it; let me, and then maybe it won't be coming back so much in my sleep. It's about Matt—poor little Matt, and his letter. From one of his sweethearts. He was always bragging, you know, about his sweethearts. Andy scolded him, and he didn't care, he bragged all the same. When he died he had the letter in his hand. Blood on it, and I knew he wouldn't want it spoiled like that. I tried to clean it, but—hum—that's not it. How I do muddle everything when I talk! They buried it with him, that miserable little letter—from a sweetheart of his. He tried to make out (that's what I'm getting at) tried to make out that it had come from a sweetheart. And—you know—he never had one. That's what hurts. Little Matt . . . so queer-looking, and hunchbacked . . . little Matt never had a sweetheart. I kissed him, though. I did, Hal. I even wanted to make love to him. But couldn't. How could I, when we were so busy shooting our shells away? He had lead in him. And then, after the last rush the Indians made, I saw they had put an arrow through his heart."

In facing the inevitable, how paltry we feel, and

yet how desperate! North even had a queer notion that what Winnie had been saying was merely a foreboding of what had not yet happened but must happen, unless he could contrive, somehow, to outwit destiny. So, as the girl talked of Andy and of Matt, North kept trying to arrange things differently, to alter the course of fate. But he knew, of course, that he could do nothing about that. What must be, will be; and what's done *is* done.

Sometimes he caught himself up sharply. "I listen with a divided mind; maybe I have missed some of it." A sort of craven triumph came to him with the thought that he might, perhaps, escape a little of the intolerable truth. He even said aloud: "Enough. I've heard enough."

All at once tormenting anger flamed up in him, a rage of helplessness. He told himself: "I thought it safer here. I sent her back. And now, see!"

His teeth gritted. A passion to rend and strike and curse must have found expression of some sort, if he had not suddenly given way to a flood of pity. He said in the after years how strange it was that his eye should have been drawn to anything so trifling as some crumpled leaves. He looked at them closely. They were mullein leaves, and he understood at once that Winnie had been rubbing her cheeks with them in order that their weedy roughness might, perhaps, bring back a little colour into her sallow face.

Oh, the sweet vanity! She with her foolish cap and her mullein leaves!

"You, Winnie," he began, but knew that he was not going to say what he wanted to say, "you put

up a fight—you, and those two men. A good fight, eh? You couldn't help it."

The girl, having caught up one of his phrases, declared with a flash of the old clear brightness in her eyes:

"It *was* a good fight. Only Andy, somehow, kept grieving about it. He'd been hit; but it wasn't that, understand—not that making him whine and grumble so. 'I was going back,' he'd say. 'I got a load of presents, and everything; and now see what's up.' Sometimes he'd talk about his family, his little people. The tribe had been taking care of the children and their mother; he was sure of that, because Indians aren't selfish, they won't have poverty among them. It's their way: they share what they have. . . . And now to be fighting them! 'I'm a whelp,' he'd say. 'I'm a scoundrel. My own people, and I'm fighting them!' Most of all he'd talk about his wife, Singing Thrush. He wanted to make things right with her if he could—to let her see that she hadn't been forgotten. I hoped he would shut up. I couldn't stand it, hardly, and kept wishing we had Mike along with us; for he'd joke, be sure to—he'd joke and sing and carry on, and I knew we'd have to laugh if Mike was there. I wanted to laugh. I didn't want to feel bad when I had my fighting to do. By and by I told Andy so; and Matt told him. But, somehow, he couldn't quit talking. What bothered him most was that maybe his wagon, and everything in it, wouldn't be taken to his wife. I said he needn't worry. Hal North would look after that. Matt and I both told him so, and he knew it himself. But sometimes he

got to doubting; for maybe you wouldn't get back. And then what? So he went on, till a body got sick of hearing it. He talked while he fought. He kept shooting—every shot a sorrow and a grief to him! He was bleeding, but he kept telling us that they were not bad people, not at all bad people, his Indians. It was only that they had been bullied so much, and put upon, and driven to desperation. The buffalo is vanishing; and they won't know how to live, he said, without the buffalo. It means starvation. They fight, they burn, they destroy; they want to clear the great plains of all our race. 'Quit your gabble,' Matt would tell him. 'Drop it. What's the good of hitting it up like that?' But Andy didn't stop. Only when tearing sounds got into his throat, and the gasp and strangle of death—only then he changed his tune. Water! He wanted water. We ought to give him a drink. Why didn't we? Acted as if we had plenty of water, and were meanly keeping it from him. I couldn't quite make out what he muttered at the last—something, I believe, about calico, ribbon, beads. All for her. For his wife, Singing Thrush. Yes, and she must have them. Mustn't she? Don't you say so?"

"Of course she must," North agreed. "And shall have them, Winnie—shall, if I can get them to her."

CHAPTER IV

The Kiss

FROM the moment of first talking with Harry North, after his return, Mrs. Ross could not help being distressed by what she had divined. She even feared that the heat, the long ride, the wound, the repeated shocks of bad news might prove altogether too much for him. He seemed chilled, despite the prairie's stupefying sultriness; and while the wounded girl talked to him he had begun quivering all over.

As soon as she fell into a doze he got up, laboured to his feet, and steadied himself against the awning-pole. But how he got away from there, into the shadow of a wagon, he could never remember. Mrs. Ross followed him with a canteen which he seized with greedy haste, after he had sunk upon the ground. Only the mouth-piece vexed him; it would not let him drink fast enough. He ended by shaking the disc-shaped vessel, anxiously splashing his throat with water. Then came forgetfulness.

His illness quickly passed into a fevered state ever fluctuating between delirium and half consciousness. Sometimes there seemed to be a number of people gathered about him, and he heard with great rancour how they went on discussing his condition, as if he were not present. Again he would be alone

in a room with moving walls. Or was it a room? It could be a tent, he thought, or a ship. He liked the place, but would like it better if only it didn't shake so much, and if only there could be some good way to keep his enemies out. They would ask how he was getting on, and that was done to deceive him. He knew very well that they didn't want him to get on.

While lying outdoors on a buffalo robe he would see the stars swimming in the sky, and when Mrs. Ross came to sit by him, she had the oddest way of turning into someone else. Once she was metamorphosed into a man with reddish whiskers, a meddlesome person who restrained him by force, and senselessly refused to let him get up and do what he wanted to do.

Exhausted by efforts to get free, North sank back and slept for twelve hours at a stretch. The first time that he returned to complete consciousness was toward evening, on the second day after rejoining the wagon-train. By the odour of camp-fire smoke he knew the caravan had corralled for the night; but he could not understand the good moist fragrance coming up from the ground all about the place where he lay. Drops quivered on grass-blades, many shower drops brightened into liquid jewels by the westering sun.

"Has it rained?" he inquired of a tall man looking down at him.

"Hullo, he's come to!" the watcher exclaimed. And he asked with surprised elation: "Do you know me?"

"Marvin," the injured man replied, sitting up at

once. "And how's the baby?" he inquired. As he spoke he caught sight of spectacled eyes looking at him with concentrated interest.

"This," the visitor added, as he indicated the short man of reddish beard and glasses, "is Doctor Lunn. Belongs to a Mormon train. As soon as he finished looking over the sick folks at my place I thought it mightn't be a bad idea to have him come with me to look you up."

"Thanks, thanks," North articulated, and pressed the hand of the physician. "And how is it with her, Doctor Lunn? Our other patient—have you seen her?"

With a jerky mannerism of speech, and a foreign accent—Swedish perhaps—the practitioner said:

"The travel you must quit. You could, maybe, lay up at Julesburg. That's it. You know, I believe, how it should not yet be correct—for a wound like what you got—so much jouncing in a wagon. Another thing for caution: that your fever should not run himself into brain fever. Eh, you comprehend me?"

With a look at once irritated and beseeching, North said:

"Tell me, please, about Miss Barton. Have you dressed her wound?"

Marvin and Lunn exchanged glances; then the doctor wiped his spectacles with a blue handkerchief speckled with white dots.

"Have you?" North insisted.

At this moment Mrs. Ross appeared. The physician said to her, as he put on his spectacles and rubbed his palms together:

"He's conscious. The cooling off of the air, it appears . . . and the hail falling . . . very good, very good."

"If only she wouldn't keep asking for him!" Mrs. Ross blurted out. "What's one to do? But he mustn't go to her, I suppose."

Instantly North got to his feet. Tottering a little at first, he walked away from the men. "Winnie, Winnie," he kept saying as he went. "Where are you?"

Mrs. Ross conducted him to where she lay, and he was presently to see that the rainy afternoon, with its fierce thunder showers and rattles of hail, had been beneficial to her, as to him. Wet compresses had also helped to keep her fever down. But now, as the sunset hour came on, even though the air remained cool and tranquil, her restlessness indicated a rising temperature. Lunn had given it as his opinion, after making a long examination in the forenoon, that nothing remained to be done for her except to make her as comfortable as possible.

Although she had her quiet intervals, almost free from pain, and although there were periods when her mind came clear for lucid thinking, the time grew more and more prolonged when she strove against delirium, exerting herself to keep down the troubling visions.

"They annoy a body so!" North heard her complaining, as he seated himself, unrecognized, beside her pillow. "My head goes on getting mussed up inside, and flighty, and full of nightmarish nonsense."

In one of her vagaries she seemed to talk with her mother, discussing the important point of how some

new aprons should be made; and again she joked and disputed with her father. "If you growl and grumble a-plenty about not being sick," she ironically informed him, "that is surely going to cure you."

Once she said to Mrs. Ross: "I wish I could keep awake. The craziness don't bother so much if I keep awake."

Even when her eyes remained open there was one vision in particular that seemed to come back many times. She listened to inaudible speech; she gazed at an invisible presence, and often talked to someone whom neither Mrs. Ross nor Doctor North could see. But let him smooth her forehead with his hand, or put on another wet towel, and the phantom visitor would depart.

With a cajoling smile Winifred presently observed:

"She's not there—not really. Is she? You don't see anything? No, of course, because it's only my silly head up to its silly tricks again." And yet a little while later she might address vacancy with fretful irritation: "So, here you are again! Goodness knows how you manage it. A long ways to travel, but, apparently. . . . Well, and how are the children? Is Connie well? Did Arthur get home all right?"

After the towel compress for her head had been wet with vinegar to see whether that might not prove more efficacious than water, the girl presently exclaimed, as one who had made an interesting discovery:

"That's queer; that's awfully queer! How is it that there's two of me? Twins. How ridiculous

to be twins! We're a lot different, though, in some ways. That me, over there, is such a sensible girl, and this me—foo!—is such a goose! She talks, that one does; I hear her, and it's very reasonable talk. I mustn't grieve for Andy—that's what she says. I mustn't, because he didn't belong to any race but our race, and he couldn't ever be happy living with the brown people. He loves them, but he ran away from them. He was coming back with presents, but he would be restless and discontented. Would run away again, most likely. Why should he have fought as he did, if he really belonged to them? Then the goose (that's the other me), she says he would, too, have been happy with the brown people. He loved them—his wife, Singing Thrush, and his little folks. Then, why not be happy? And the other, the sensible me, speaks up: 'You talk like that because you try to think there is someone would be happy with you if you were his wife. But it isn't so. He likes you. His cool gray eyes can have warmth in them when he looks at you, because he likes you. But love? That's another thing. It's she, the children's aunt, he really loves. And can't you see, you great silly, that you hardly belong to the same race with him? You never, *never* in this world could make him happy. No, not even if he loved you as much as Andy loved his Singing Thrush.' Yet the poor goose argues still that she would surely know how to make him happy, because she loves him. Only, of course, it's not enough to love; she knows it isn't; and she only goes on arguing, because it's so hard to give up."

After a time, when these grotesqueries of mind had

melted away, and left in their wake a clean mood of fresh rationality, Winnie asked:

"What have I been saying? A lot of absurd stuff, was it? If it was love talk and babble, don't you believe it, Hal. What's more, you shouldn't listen. It's wrong to listen—hateful and mean, so it is. You ought to be ashamed."

But he said with great gentleness and the look in his eyes which she longed to see:

"Maybe, Winnie—after all—it's nothing I shouldn't have heard. For it has reminded me of what I have wanted to tell you. Don't you remember that when I left I promised to tell you something? Well, it is this: that you have helped, more than you can ever know, in giving me courage to live, to face life, to win back my confidence in myself and in the work I am most fit to do."

The girl could not hearken to this, for her attention had wandered. She had begun to talk once more with the invisible someone.

"Don't have too much blame for me," she was imploring. "Don't be scornful. I've loved him; that's so. I've loved, and laughed, and sung, and lived for him; I've lied to get him from you. But—no good. He's too staunch, too loyal, too full of you!"

All at once defiance gleamed in her eyes, and she shook a finger at the phantom presence:

"You're proud; you put on airs. But just wait. You'll see. I have good looks, the same as you. I have a light heart and some nice ways, and he's going to love me as much—as much—yes, and *more* than he loves you. Don't think he will ever come

back to you. I'll lie; I'll tell stories about you and Victor; I'll make him believe what I *want* him to believe. For he's a man; and they're all blind, men are. He won't be able to see that you've always loved him, and always must!"

Suddenly she sighed, and sobbed, and fell a-crying like a little girl; she shook her head, and the tears flashed yellow in the golden sunset. Other drops kept coming and running down until her cheeks were all wet with them.

"I have to die," she was saying, "because I am hurt. So you see, I'm not the one—you're the one who is to have him. That's why I sent for you. The men repairing the telegraph line took the message. I paid them, and they took it. Forgive me. I only wanted to see if you would come. If you loved him, you would. But I didn't want you to. I hoped you wouldn't. There was Victor. You could have Victor—— And I, if you didn't come—— But it can't be. I'm hurt too much. The sun will go out. And I have always loved the sun!—— How can gray eyes have so much light in them? *They* are the sun. I go alone, into the dark, because I am hurt. But O, I have loved him! I have loved no other man than him."

As she spoke Harry North bowed down over her, and kissed her.

The sun had gone down.

She was not to know it, but as the afternoon faded, and evening fell, oblivion returned to Harry North, so that he would not learn for many days to come that Winifred had died. This new prostration of his, long enduring, was one which muddled time and

the sequence of events. He could not tell whether it was Mrs. Ross or his mother who was attending him in a prairie abode, a dug-out of one room, with a muslin ceiling cloth. There were times when he seemed to distinguish another person, a young woman reading in a book with copper clasps.

Often he would say to this one:

"I don't know who you are."

But why didn't he know? He felt humiliated that the nurse, who moved quietly, spoke gently, and was ever subdued in manner, should be one who would not allow herself to be identified. Her youth and freshness pleased him; she knew how to help him get rid of troubling visions.

"You're not travelling any more," she used to assure him, when he complained of the rough trail and the jouncing of the wagon. "Don't you see?" she would add, tapping the cabin wall with her hand to show how steady it was. "This is not a wagon but a house."

"How did you get in?" he asked; for a contradictory impression was queerly his that she had not been here before, but only now had slipped in by means of some mystifying trick. Why practise deception of that sort? Maybe she wanted to tell him something. Yet where was the good in telling him that many of the stars, but not all, are inhabited, and that the grandmother of a potato bug has no soul?

Was the visitor mocking at him? Was she? He meant to rebuke her for it.

"But no, it's delirium," he told himself, and felt very clever to have discovered, all by himself, that

his companion was too well bred to worry him with any fantastic notion about a potato bug's soul.

He would scold her, all the same; he would craftily scold, and see by her retort whether she had been trying to torment him.

"You blab nonsense," he declared. "And why do you? Why, when someone is hurt?"

He grew positive that someone had been hurt; and it troubled him greatly that he did not know who it was. He struggled to get up and run. He must run fast, run somewhere, run until he should find the person who had been wounded.

"I know!" he exclaimed. "It's Winnie. A fine, brave spirit, and she needs me. I must go."

"No, Hal," a quieting voice answered. "She doesn't need you. Not any more—never any more."

CHAPTER V

The Cup of Kindness

TO FORT LARAMIE news had been brought by an Indian runner that the daughter of Chief Spotted Tail had died; that the body was being conveyed hither for mortuary rites; and that the funeral party, including kinsfolk and the tribal dignitary himself, had now advanced within some score of miles.

It was decided at once that the whole garrison should discreetly bestir itself to show respect, for the sake of conciliatory effect. Plainly the thing to do was to treat the coming of Spotted Tail with obsequious respect. For he was a man of high authority among his people, one of those supreme in council among the leaders of the great Sioux nation.

Hence, the military commander sent forth an ambulance to serve as hearse, and with it went a whole troop of cavalry, in addition to two pieces of artillery, a flag-fluttering processional, the chevrons of postilions vividly scarlet, the underside of blue capes flapping into flashes of brilliant yellow.

Next day, in the burial plot near the frontier army post, an Indian scaffolding of poles was raised, exactly like another one, which long had held a shape firmly wrapped and sealed in furry robes, reposing there in sepulchre open to the sky. It was the final

resting place of the notable Dakota leader, Old Smoke, a relative of Chief Spotted Tail.

A rank of soldiery, presenting arms, formed a spacious hollow square about the coffin, while Indian mourners, men and women, more closely encircled the bier. According to tribal custom, the casket headed east, reverentially east, toward the Gates of the Dawn, where the Sun Father shows his face for the encouragement of man, after the gloomy night is done.

But this bleak day had little enough to inspirit any one. Now and again the feeble sunshine was smirched out by tatters of storm-cloud muddily racing. Gusts of icy wind whistled through the bleached grass of the cemetery, and the framework of the scaffold shook with dreary shudderings.

When the lidded coffin in its wrapping of buffalo robe had been raised to its place on the platform, sleet began to fall, gustily, harshly, in great rasping sweeps of frozen sibilance.

Before the service had come to an end two persons left the burial ground, a man and a woman walking side by side. She, with a shawl enveloping her head, yielded confidently to his direction, and eagerly listened as he said to her:

"I have told you her story, all of it, as I had it from Big Andy. Only he didn't know, I believe, that the chief's daughter was consumptive. Or perhaps she wasn't when he saw her last. It appears that her father's people, the Brule, have kept clear of the recent troubles. While the raids were going on and the burning of stage stations, he has held his forces to the north country. I am told that he restlessly moved his camp from place to place:

to Big Horn, to Rose Bud, to Tongue River and back again to Powder River."

"It was on Powder River, wasn't it, where his daughter died?" The young woman questioned with abstraction in her tone; for her chief interest lay in something quite different. "Tell me, Hal," she added, "what you have found out about Andy's wife. Did she come with these others? Is she here? Have you seen Singing Thrush?"

"What, I haven't told you?" His hand linked with that of his companion, firmly clasping hers. After a time he said: "You were right, my dear: I need not have feared to see her and to tell her of her husband's death. He had not forgotten her. He was coming back to her. She had given him up as lost out of her life forever; but now she sees—as you told me she would—that so long as he lived he could never be quite lost to her. The gifts he was bringing are love tokens. She understands that, and they are her consolation. We are to see her in the morning. She will come to our wagon, she with her two boys. The third child, she told me, is too young to make a long journey in bad weather, and so was left behind with relatives, in the Dakota village on Powder River."

Far more impatient than the Indian mother, this young woman wanted to go at once to the camp ground, where the Dakota tepees had been set up. It turned out, however, that when she and Harry North were conducted toward those cone-shaped abodes, brown and obscure in the evening, with smoke blown aslant from their tops, it was toward the chief's lodge that they were ushered.

An invitation to visit Spotted Tail had been conveyed by his nephew; and the three went on together, their pace emphasized by the wind-blown flutter of feminine garments and the crunch of sleet under boot-soles briskly stepping.

From the inrush of cold air, when the door-flap had been raised, the tepee cleared itself at once of wood smoke; but the cedary tang of it remained even after the warm vapour had gone swirling upward, in gusty haste, through the orifice amid the lodge-pole tops. The visitors, as they came in, scented an odour of tanned robes, but the damp smell of storm they themselves brought here upon their clothing.

Their host did not rise to give them greeting. In the fur-matted place, opposite the entrance, he awaited them, not so much as raising his eyes; for one does not embarrass his guest with bold gazing or inquisitive looks. Only when those whom he wished to honour had been conducted about the half circle of the lodge, and so brought to the chiefly station, did he seem to become aware of them.

His nephew said in English:

"They have come. The light of the lodge shines on them."

The chief arose, and looked into the face of the man and of the woman; and over the heads of the visitors he then raised his hands, graciously as a father. Having made the sign indicating a cloud, he pushed upward with his palms to banish the cloud, as who would say: "There has been gloom in the sky. But now you are here. Now darkness cannot stay. The holy sun is shining."

A little back of the chief's place, to his right, a

fur-cushioned mat had been placed for each of the guests, on a bearskin rug; and after they had been seated, all remained still in the lodge. Neither looking at them, nor stirring in any way, the tribal leader sat long in meditation.

Reverential dignity manifested itself in everything he did: in the filling of the redstone pipe; in the lighting of the tobacco with a coal lifted from the fire; in the touching of Holy Earth with the end of the pipe while drawing smoke into his mouth, and likewise in his recognition of spiritual forces by offering the pipe to the sky, to the north, the east, the south, and the west. The first breath of vapour passing from his lips, after he had reseated himself, was toward the heavens.

Thus concluding this phase of the ritual, he next passed the calumet over his right arm, to the visitor, for the ceremony to be continued.

"*Na*," said the chief, quite as though the guest were not a white man, but an Indian who would know what was expected of him. And the guest really did know, so that when the tobacco had been finally consumed through repeated turns of smoking the pipe was taken by him to the fire, and the bowl there emptied: ashes to ashes, dust to dust; the holy plant, with its spirit fled, returning once again to the Earth that gave it.

When the time for talking had properly come, the chief spoke, and afterward waited for his words to be put into English by his nephew:

"The lodge fire is never so bright as when it sees good hearts. One of our friends does not know, maybe, that he has a name among us, Snow-on-the-Green-Tree."

Being so identified, as one who is young and yet has gray hair, Doctor North asked in wonderment:

"But how is it that I have a Dakota name?—how, when I am not known among you?"

For a long time the question remained unanswered. With knees stretching the blue robe which enwrapped the chief from the waist down and gave ease to his crossed legs, holding them comfortably in position, Spotted Tail sat in grave immobility. He went on looking nowhere but into the fire.

Now and again a rattle of sleet, like bird shot, came sharply spurting down through the smoke-hole, hissing briefly and spitefully into the flames. Meanwhile the countenance of the tribal leader, all lit by the glow of the fire, had the stillness and the warmth of a face on a copper coin brightly new. The visitors, as they looked at him, saw what others might not have seen: a sorrow poignantly profound despite the seeming calm of his stony repose.

During this period of solemn silence the guests grew aware that another young man had entered the tepee, and was making the circuit of the lodge, from left to right. Evidently he had come to deposit beside the tribal dignitary a fringed bag of white leather, elaborately decorated with a bright-hued embroidery of quills. The coming and the going of the youth's moccasined feet had a soundless tread, precisely as though he might have attained brotherhood with the cat-creatures, the panthers of the mountains.

Presently the interpreter, again speaking quietly and deliberately, began to repeat what the chief was saying to the white man:

"You are known. Some of our young men have been with the Cheyenne raiders, in the Valley of Shallow Waters. There was one ready to sing his death song. You went to him. Though you were bleeding and had an arrow through your body, you went to him. Though he shot you and spat on you, there was still cold water for him, that you gave him in kindness, with a good heart. You are known."

This being gravely asserted, the chief now turned his eyes toward the woman:

"Snow-on-the-Green-Tree he has been called. But the time has come, finally, for him to have another name. From where the moon now stands he shall be known among us as Giver-of-Cold-Water. You have seen him who drank. He came, and went out; he brought what I have to show you. He calls me Father. He is my brother's son."

"What, after such a wound!" North exclaimed. "Still living?"

"He lives. He lives strongly. He sang his song answering the ghosts—but he lives."

The hand of the young man went out impulsively, and closed upon the woman's; and the look in his face seemed to be declaring:

"I, too, was hurt; but through kindness I have lived." Speaking very earnestly, he said: "She came to me at Julesburg. I believe I should not be here now if she had not come to me."

As he spoke the cannon in the cemetery boomed through the storm, since in honour to the dead that piece of artillery was to fire a salute, at half-hour intervals, all night long. Even though silence may be better for sad hearts than noise, this must be the

way of the white soldiers, the Long-Knife people, of manifesting respect.

The glum reverberations having grumbled away, far-spreading into the swish and sleety rush of wind, the chief exhibited something which he had taken from the bag of snow-white leather. It was a round object enclosed by a parfleche case, a relic of the most paltry sort: a dented tin cup. The tribal leader displayed the thing, held it to the firelight, turned it over and over, and even looked at the young woman, as if he had been showing her a treasure very remarkable.

"An arrow through him," the chief affirmed, "but he did not hate. Gave water. The young man who shot the arrow was caught up by comrades and carried safely away. He has brought us this, a holy cup. It is the cup of kindness."

The woman visitor did not look into the chief's face, but quite away, into the fire, where all her past seemed now to be rising. She recalled with what a rebellious spirit she had seen the departure of her lover, with his ox-team and wagon; she remembered angry disappointments of bitter days, the hard struggle, the fading of her youth, the thwarted love, all the distress and storm of her proud heart's suffering.

But here, in this smoky lodge, unexpectedly and incredibly, she had beheld the battered emblem of a man's achievement. A poor thing, a dented tin cup! And yet it humbled her; for it was something from which a heartsick people were still drinking consolation.

As she went on sitting here in the stillness, with the

hum of the wind through the tops of the lodge-poles, and the scurry of sleet ticking against them, it is odd that she should have begun to feel ineffably at rest with the world. Struggle, it seemed to her, had ended. It was as if she had reached finally the goal which she had long been seeking.

In this yielding to deep serenity, in this beneficent mood of sweetness and freshness, she could not but feel that the solemn joy now hers was something to endure—the prize which comes not to those who would selfishly have it, but to those who earn it; the reward which is not mere happiness, but wisdom of heart. Yes, it was that: the grace of understanding, the profound acceptance of the meanness and the mightiness, the shadow and the light, the pity and the glory of the thing called Life. Never, in the after years, would she fear it; for when abiding love is ours, then life is good, and all its paths are peace.

When she rose presently, with her husband's hand still clasping hers—now that the time had come for leave-taking—Alice noted that the chief also had risen. And when he began to speak again, it was with courageous hopefulness about the future of his race:

"Birth-givers suffer pain," he was deliberately saying. "Spring comes, there has to be struggle. 'Birth', my daughter always called it. She saw how game is disappearing. She foresaw that the buffalo will vanish away. And she used to ask: 'When the wild herds are gone, what then? Must we get our living out of the earth? But how? Who will teach us? How can young men, who have always been hunters, be brought to dig, and plant, and toil,

and cut grass? Little children will cry with the hunger-pain, and there will be no meat.'"

Here the stark lips of the chief twitched a little—not in mourning for the dead, but in grief for his people's sorrowing. Soon, however, he grew calm again, and with palms toward the ground, and then raised toward the sky, that the blessing of our Earth-Mother and of our Sun-Father might come to these two, his quiet visitors, he stretched forth his hands over them before they should go hence into the night and the storm. Then he began speaking his benison, in the way of wisdom, quietly:

"Laughter is given to man, and tears. Change comes. There is death, and there is birth; heat and frost must have their day. And we, the children of the Earth, have to keep our hearts strong lest we fear birth and death, and lose our way in the black trails of sorrow."

THE END

THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS
GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

YB 32064

M13746

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY